

**PART I—TRAGEDY AND MORAL REDRESS**

## Chapter 1—Oedipus: *hamartia*, freedom, and the supernatural

### 1 A question of blame

Nothing in the study of tragedy has been the subject of so much controversy as the question of the guilt or innocence of Sophocles' Oedipus, who, having been told by Apollo's oracle that he would murder his father and marry his mother, shunned Corinth, where he had been brought up by Polybus and Merope. He did this because he assumed that Polybus and Merope were his real parents, despite the fact that his birth had been called in question (admittedly by a drunkard) at a feast, that, on being asked to satisfy him on the point, his supposed parents had prevaricated, and that Apollo too, when asked by Oedipus who his real parents were, had evaded the question. Travelling from Delphi, Oedipus arrived at a crossroads where he encountered an older man, clearly a nobleman of some sort, riding in a carriage and accompanied by servants. These ordered Oedipus to get out of the way, he refused and struck out, they retaliated, and in the ensuing fracas Oedipus killed the lord and, as he thought, the entire entourage (in fact one retainer escaped). He found his way to Thebes, which was being terrorized by the grisly Sphinx; Oedipus solved the latter's famous riddle, and so routed it. Since Thebes' king, Laius, had recently been killed, Oedipus was offered the throne, which he accepted together with the hand of Laius' widow, Jocasta. Thus the play's background: during the course of Sophocles' drama it turns out that the older man whom Oedipus killed was Laius, king of Thebes and his own father, and that Jocasta is his mother. When the facts emerge, Jocasta commits suicide, and Oedipus blinds himself. The play begins some years into Oedipus' reign. As king of Thebes, he is called upon to cure the city of a strange plague: his attempts to ascertain its causes lead, step by agonizing step, to the discovery of his origin and past deeds; the play ends with Oedipus' separation from his children, a scene which is 'one of the most overwhelming moments in the Western imaginative tradition, bearing comparison with Priam's kissing of Achilles' hands, or Lear's final entry with Cordelia's body in his arms, or Wotan's Farewell'.<sup>1</sup>

The question I wish to address first in this book is whether Oedipus is guilty. Is he to blame for his fate? This has often, especially since the onset of the early-modern period, been

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<sup>1</sup> Buxton 1996, 45. On the problems presented by the end of the play, see Segal 1981, 208; M. Davies 1982 and 1991; Macleod 1983, 141–2; Roberts 1988, 183–4; Mastrorarde 1994, 24–5; D. Fowler 2000, 6, 244–6, 302; Taplin 2001, 45–6; Budelmann 2006a; Burian 2009; Goldhill 2015, 240–2.

considered to be the play's central problem.<sup>2</sup> An influential statement was that of André Dacier, who in his commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics* declared that Oedipus' transgression was 'the fault of a man who, consumed by anger at the insolence of a coachman who tries to move him aside against his will, kills four men two days after the oracle had warned him that he would kill his own father', and that he was beset by 'pride, violence and a fit of anger, temerity and imprudence' (1692, 192). In a sense, Dacier conceded, Oedipus' punishment was unjust, because his acts of parricide and incest were involuntary; but though he was ignorant he was also foolish, reckless, and subject to passion. His vices are just those 'of which Sophocles wants us to rid ourselves'.<sup>3</sup> If Dacier imagined that he had spoken the last word on the question of Oedipus' guilt he was sadly mistaken, and the matter has been vigorously debated ever since. Sophocles' tragedy, according to many, is not about guilt and punishment; rather, it aims to be an *imago humanae vitae*, and in particular to insist on the frailty of human happiness. Such critics have often held Oedipus to be morally innocent. Thus, in his influential book on Aristotle's *Poetics*, first published in 1894, S. H. Butcher construed the facts of the Oedipus story rather differently from Dacier, opining that, 'though of a hasty and impulsive temperament', Oedipus was not, 'broadly speaking', brought down by 'any striking moral defect', for 'his character was not the determining factor in his fortunes. He, if any man, was in a genuine sense the victim of circumstances. In slaying Laius he was probably in some degree morally culpable. But the act was certainly done after provocation, and possibly in self-defence' (1951, 320). Others have gone further than Butcher and affirmed Oedipus to be entirely free from blame. So in 1899, two hundred years after Dacier's *déclaration*, the foremost classicist of the age, Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff, spoke *ein großes Machtwort*: 'Oedipus hat sich nichts vorzuwerfen', he pronounced; 'Oedipus has nothing to reproach himself with' (1935–72, vol. 6, 209). And therewith he certainly intended to end the dispute once and for all.

But the opposition could not be so easily dismissed, and in the chapter that he contributed to his son Tycho's book on Sophocles, Wilamowitz *Vater* stated that the verbiage about Oedipus' guilt would never end, because there would always be people who *den getretenen Quark weiter treten*. 'But they should at least admit that they thereby claim to understand Sophocles better than he understood himself' (1996, 350). I shall be treading the same quark again here; do I claim to understand Sophocles better than he understood himself? Well,

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<sup>2</sup> See Korzeniewski 2003, 476–505; Lurje 2004, 13–225.

<sup>3</sup> Dacier 1692, 193. Cf. Lurje 2004, 132–3; Billings 2014, 24–5.

Sophocles may or may not have understood his own play, and what we, Sophocles' modern readers and spectators, are interested in is not what he, the man, thought his work meant, but what it did, and does, mean.<sup>4</sup> But if Wilamowitz's talk of how Sophocles understood his play is just a roundabout way of referring to the meaning of the work (as such talk often is), then clearly someone who treads the same quark again is not going simultaneously to concede that he or she misunderstands that work. Whichever way you cut the cake, then (if that is what the quark is for), Wilamowitz's remark misfires. Still, many recent commentators could have wished that he had laid the whole matter of Oedipus' guilt to rest. As E. R. Dodds discovered at Oxford in the early 1960s, undergraduate heads were simply chock-full of heresy. Whereupon Dodds spoke *ein kleines Machtwort* for the edification of the young and impressionable, in his article 'On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*', hoping therewith to consign such views as Dacier's to the archive for good. Dodds's essay is often regarded as a classic,<sup>5</sup> and as having put the whole issue beyond dispute. But, alas, it was again not to be: Dacier's approach lives on, and it has even been revived in recent years in Wilamowitz's own land by such able commentators as Eckard Lefèvre and Arbogast Schmitt.

'The plays of Sophocles, it is often supposed, exalt heroic individuals who surmount the worst that can be put upon them by gods indifferent or cruel', remarks Robert Parker, continuing: 'But there is much to be said for a more Aristotelo-Bradleian view, whereby Sophocles' world is one marred, above all, by the disastrous flaws endemic in human personality' (1999, 23). Against this stands a pervasive modern view that the 'tradition of humanistic, secularized, and psychological readings',<sup>6</sup> championed by Bradley and in some sense also by Aristotle, is in error. I shall be defending the 'Aristotelo-Bradleian view', here in connection with the *Oedipus Rex*, and in the next chapter with the *Antigone*. Further, I shall suggest in this Part that the view applies quite generally to the protagonists of Western tragedy. In brief: typically, tragic protagonists fall through their own fault. I start my defence of the 'Aristotelo-Bradleian view' with Aristotle; we shall come to Bradley in due course.

## **2 Aristotle and the concept of *hamartia***

In chapter 13 of the *Poetics* Aristotle argued that the best form of tragedy concerns a hero or heroine who is neither morally outstanding nor morally base, but somewhere in between, or is

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<sup>4</sup> See Gaskin 2013a, ch. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Bain 1993, 81; J. Gould 2001, 244.

<sup>6</sup> Ewans 1996, 450.

rather better than worse, but who falls, in such a way as to elicit the emotions of pity and fear in the audience, because of some significant (*megalē*) *hamartia*.<sup>7</sup> The translation of this last word has vexed commentators and critics endlessly. Dodds remarks that the concept of *hamartia* covers both false moral judgement and intellectual error, and that ‘the average Greek did not make our sharp distinction between the two’.<sup>8</sup> (In English the use of the term ‘ignorant’ in a social or moral sense is still found in some places, or was until recently.)<sup>9</sup> Dodds might have gone further, and pointed out that the distinction itself is suspect. In his article ‘*Hamartia* in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy’, still the most important discussion of *hamartia* to date, T. C. W. Stinton argued persuasively that the word ‘*hamartia*’ has a wide range of meanings, including ones that by any reckoning count as moral. For example, Aristotle characterizes the ignorance of the wicked man (*mochthēros*) of what he should do and what omit to do as a *hamartia*.<sup>10</sup> Again, in Euripides’ *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, Clytemnestra describes Helen, whom she has every reason to regard as a serious transgressor, as ‘mistaken’ (*examartousa*, 1204), which shows how strong, in a moral sense, this word can be.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps even more strikingly, Orestes accuses Apollo in the *Orestes* of *hamartia* (596), a bold move in Euripides’ best blasphemous style, clearly evincing a moral sense. Stinton was anticipated by Gilbert Murray, who is in his preface to Bywater’s translation of the *Poetics* remarked, concerning Aristotle’s concept of *hamartia*, that ‘it is a mistake of method to argue whether he means “an intellectual error” or “a moral flaw”’. The word is not so precise’.<sup>12</sup> ‘Flaw’ here is wrongly selected, both given the contrast Murray wanted to draw and in the light of general considerations, as we shall see shortly: he should have written ‘a moral error’. But *modulo* that adjustment his point stands. Despite these precedents, we still regularly encounter simplistic statements such as the following: ‘For Aristotle (Chapter 13), Oedipus is an

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<sup>7</sup> On the legitimacy of the terms ‘hero’ and ‘heroine’, see D. Lucas 1972, 115, 140, and Vickers 1973, 7–8, against Jones 1962, 12–18 (duBois 2008 supports Jones); also Halliwell 1990b, 173–4; Gill 1996, 98–9; Silk 2004, 246–7; Rose 2012, 257.

<sup>8</sup> Dodds 1973, 66. This is esp. clear in Euripides: see e.g. *Cyclops* 173; *Children of Heracles* 458; *Hippolytus* 377–81, 996; *Andromache* 674, 1165; *Hecuba* 327; *Electra* 50–3, 294–6, 386–90, 971–2, 1035; *Heracles* 172, 283, 347, 1254; *Iphigeneia in Tauris* 385–6; *Ion* 374; *Helen* 851, 1441; *Phoenician Women* 86, 393, 569–70, 584, 1726–7; *Orestes* 417, 492–3; also [Aeschylus], *Prometheus Vincit* 9 and 1039; with the commentaries of Seaford, Allan, Barrett, Stevens, J. Gregory, Denniston, Cropp, Bond, L. Parker, Lee, Mastronarde, Willink, and Griffith ad locc. Cf. Denniston 1939, xxii; Butcher 1951, 321; Dodds 1951, 16–17; D. Lucas 1972, 301; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 122; Dihle 1982, 33–4; Dover 1994, 116–24; Mastronarde 2010, 190; Rutherford 2012, 379.

<sup>9</sup> Bond mentions Ulster in this connection (on Euripides, *Heracles* 283); I recall the usage from my childhood in the North-East of Scotland; Malcolm Heath tells me that he encountered it in Yorkshire.

<sup>10</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* (NE) 1110b29. Cf. D. Lucas 1972, 300.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Euripides, *Trojan Women* 1028; *Ion* 426; *Alcestis* 709–10, with L. Parker ad loc.

<sup>12</sup> Bywater 1920, 11.

exemplary tragic figure whose fall is consequent on an intellectual error (*hamartia*) rather than any morally dubious action'.<sup>13</sup> What Stinton showed is that the 'rather than' here is misconceived.

Stinton notes that it would be fallacious to argue that contexts in which the word '*hamartia*' is applied to a failure to hit the target, or similar, are non-moral ones if the failure in question is one that we would classify as moral.<sup>14</sup> But he does not question the widespread modern assumption that there is a fundamental division between moral and intellectual error: he does not allow the Greek policy of using one word to cover both of these cases to suggest to us that perhaps our neat distinction between the two is facile. This emerges from his insistence that Oedipus' error was of a factual, *not* of a moral, nature; what goes missing here is the thought that it might be both—that a given factual error *could be* a moral error, and, more generally, that moral error might be a species of factual error (morality being a domain of fact); correspondingly, that moral intelligence and moral stupidity might be genuine cognitive categories. Again, Stinton draws up a list of what he takes to be the range of *hamartiai* that we can presume Aristotle would have wished to allow as constituting good subject matter for tragedy. The list comprises (i) some involuntary acts (*akousia*), namely acts done through ignorance, that is, mistake of fact, unless the consequences are wholly unforeseeable; and (ii) voluntary acts (*hekousia*), including so-called mixed actions (see §5 below), acts done in ignorance due to passion, acts of injustice (*adikēmata*) committed without deliberation because of the onset of a passion, and acts that arise from *akrasia*, weakness of will (1990, 157–8). Stinton remarks that all these involve extenuating circumstances. He does not suggest that they all have a moral dimension, but they do. Even the involuntary acts that he lists have a moral status, since here wholly unforeseeable consequences are expressly excluded: the agent could and perhaps should have foreseen the consequences, but did not.

Dodds observes that 'Since *Poetics* 13 is in general concerned with the moral character of the tragic hero, many scholars have thought in the past (and many undergraduates still think) that the *hamartia* of Oedipus must in Aristotle's view be a moral fault' (1973, 66). Dodds himself rejects the view that Aristotle held any *hamartia*—and so Oedipus' *hamartia*—to be necessarily in some way moral;<sup>15</sup> but I believe that this traditional interpretation of Aristotle

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<sup>13</sup> Macintosh 2009, 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> Stinton 1990, 145–6. Cf. Adkins 1966, 82; Cessi 1987, 15–28, 37; Schmitt 1988a, 184.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. D. Lucas 1972, 144–6; Halliwell 2005, 404; Conte 2007, 158; Greiner 2012, 16, 47–51, 124–6.

is correct. That is secured, I suggest, by the fact, already noted, that the tragic hero is there represented as being intermediate between the wholly virtuous agent, the *epieikēs*, who by implication is morally outstanding (not the usual sense of this word, but the context seems to constrain it here),<sup>16</sup> and the wicked or base person, the *mochthēros* or *ponēros* or *kakos*. Since the extremes are moral qualities, it follows that the intermediate position must also be moral in nature; and indeed that the tragic hero is *morally* intermediate is explicitly stated by Aristotle. Now it is true, as some critics have observed,<sup>17</sup> that Aristotle does not explicitly say that the hero's *hamartia* has to do with his morally intermediate status: one might insist that Aristotle's wording was compatible with the hero's being of a morally intermediate status *anyway*, which would leave the door open to the possibility that the *hamartia* was non-moral, and unconnected with the hero's moral character.<sup>18</sup> But that would be a disappointingly uneconomical upshot. One would expect the hero's morally intermediate status and his *hamartia* to be significantly related. In fact one would expect Aristotle to think that the hero enjoyed a morally intermediate status *in virtue of* his *hamartia*, or rather in virtue of possessing a character issuing in, and exemplified by, that *hamartia*. The philosophically taut position would be that the *hamartia* in question *measures the moral distance* between the hero's morally intermediate status and the moral status of a fully virtuous person.<sup>19</sup> Economy of thought demands that the *hamartia* be, for Aristotle, *the reason why*—or at least *organically connected with* the reason(s) why—the hero does not count as morally outstanding. If this is right, it follows that, for Aristotle, the *hamartia* committed by a tragic hero, and by virtue of which he falls below the high standards of the *epieikēs*, is a specifically *moral* mistake. (This also fits with Aristotle's use of 'hamartia' and cognates in his discussion of the virtues in *Nicomachean Ethics* II–V, where 'hamartia' is regularly used of missing the mean and tending to excess or deficiency, so that it is clearly moral in content.)

The fall of a morally flawless agent would, Aristotle informs us, occasion outrage (*Poetics* 1452b36). Why? The obvious reason is that there would, in accounting for the fall of a morally flawless agent, be a deficit of rationalization and justification.<sup>20</sup> In accordance with the principle that the events of the tragic plot should, given the initial parameters, unfold

<sup>16</sup> See on this point D. Lucas 1972, 140; Stinton 1990, 164; M. Nussbaum 1992, 150–4; Heath 2017, 337–9.

<sup>17</sup> See von Fritz 1962, 3–4; Lurje 2004, 335 n. 52.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. D. Lucas 1972, 141–4.

<sup>19</sup> Harsh 1945, 56–7; F. Lucas 1957, 117 n. 1; Cessi 1987, 29–30; Lefèvre 2001, 7; Schmitt 2011, 438; Kappl 2015, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Lear 1992, 329.

according to probability and necessity (*Poetics* 9),<sup>21</sup> Aristotle's view, one surmises, is that no such perspicuous and comprehensible causal sequence would be exemplified by a wholly good man struck down by simple ill-luck (by an *atuchēma*).<sup>22</sup> We must be able to account for the hero's fall in terms of his actions, and these actions in turn must be grounded in the agent's moral character: only so will the tragic plot unfold in an explanatorily satisfying way. So the *hamartia* must arise explicably from the agent's *character*. This is a version of the point about economy. Here we should note that Aristotle is primarily concerned with tragic *agency*. Martha Nussbaum objects to the supposition that 'hero-causality' and 'unintelligibility' are 'exhaustive options': 'They are not. There is no mystery about what happens to the Trojan women. War, rape, slavery, murder are all too easy to understand. But what mistake did *they* make, innocent or otherwise, to bring all this about?' (1992, 141). I shall examine the case of the Trojan women in Chapter 3: here I simply note that one of my conclusions there will be that, to the extent that tragedy portrays suffering as undeserved, it also diminishes the *agency* of the sufferers. (Nussbaum seems to concede this point: 1992, 156.) So I think Aristotle's view is best cast in terms of agency: to the extent that disaster befalls a tragic *agent*, it is from an explanatory perspective most economical and satisfying if that agent's suffering is organically connected to mistakes that flow from his character. (I shall say more about this formulation shortly.) And, as far as the point about outrage goes, we might add the following: it would scarcely be less outrageous for a tragic agent who, as Aristotle insists (1453a16–17), though morally intermediate is rather better than worse, to be punished for a mistake that was not organically related to his moral character, than for a morally perfect protagonist to be punished for such a mistake.<sup>23</sup> That supplies additional support to the view that the tragic hero's *hamartia* serves to measure the moral distance between his morally intermediate status and a fully virtuous person's moral status.

A further, quasi-linguistic argument for the moral nature of the hero's *hamartia* was given by Butcher in a famous passage where he wrote that the word '*hamartia*' is brought by Aristotle in *Poetics* 13 'into relation with other words of purely moral significance, words moreover which describe not an isolated act, but a more permanent state' (1951, 319). Butcher's point is that, since Aristotle says that the tragic hero is neither outstanding in virtue (*aretē*) and

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1090b19; J. Armstrong 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Harsh 1945, 49; F. Lucas 1957, 122–3; T. Gould 1966, 514–15; Cessi 1987, 265; Schmitt 2011, 437; Greiner 2012, 65.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Alexander 1955, 84–5; Halliwell 2006, 135–6.

justice (*dikaiosunē*) nor marked by wickedness (*kakia* and *mochthēria*), but falls because of a significant *hamartia*, we would expect this last word to denote, like the other key terms in its vicinity, a relatively fixed, morally assessable state of character. Now I have agreed that the context shows that Aristotle did conceive his hero's *hamartia* in moral terms. However, we must exercise care over Butcher's other inference—that '*hamartia*' denotes a *state*. In the same place Butcher influentially offered 'flaw of character'<sup>24</sup> as a gloss on Aristotelian *hamartia*, adding that the flaw should not be 'tainted by a vicious purpose'. But, as a matter of terminological book-keeping, we should insist that a *hamartia* is not *as such* a character trait; it is a mistaken action, or a mistaken belief that gives rise to a mistaken action.<sup>25</sup> So the word '*hamartia*' does not *mean* 'flaw of character'. If, for example, the *hamartia* of Virgil's Dido was her betrayal of Sychaeus, it would be a category error to suppose that this was her tragic flaw, because betrayal is an act, not a state.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the underlying point that those persuaded by Butcher's translation have often had in their sights is, I suggest, correct: namely that tragic heroes who commit *hamartiai* do so *because* they have flawed characters.<sup>27</sup> Dacier may have thought that Oedipus was punished for his character, but that cannot be right just as it stands: as we shall see in due course, he is punished for his *deeds*. Still, his deeds *arose in a comprehensible way from* his character: in a play constructed according to Aristotelian principles of probability and necessity, that is just what we should expect,<sup>28</sup> and as we shall see it is what, time after time, the tragic tradition offers us. Moreover, for an Aristotelian, an agent is at least partially responsible for his character.<sup>29</sup> The essential point was seen by Lessing, who in a letter to Moses Mendelssohn emphasized that the hero's misfortune must be *grounded*, via a *hamartia*, in his character.<sup>30</sup> And it takes us to Bradley, for two of the key doctrines of *Shakespearean Tragedy* are that 'The centre of tragedy . . . may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action', and that 'action is essentially the expression of character' (1991, 29, 35).

So the facts that *hamartia* is moral and that it is grounded in character are intimately connected in Aristotle's thinking. They are connected via the idea of the tragic agent's

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<sup>24</sup> This translation was adopted by e.g. Kitto 1960, 233, and T. Gould 1965, 366.

<sup>25</sup> Barnwell 1982, 243; cf. D. Lucas 1972, 300; Dewar-Watson 2014, 54. For a case where '*hamartia*' means a mistaken belief, see Aristotle, *NE* 1110b29.

<sup>26</sup> See here Rudd 1976, 34–5.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Ahrens Dorf 2009, 169.

<sup>28</sup> See *Poetics* 15, esp. 1454a33–6.

<sup>29</sup> *NE* III, 5; Schmitt 1988a, 162–3; Everson 1990, 93–7.

<sup>30</sup> Letter of 18 Dec. 1756 (1996, vol. 4, 192–4); Hatfield 1956, 289; H. Nisbet 2013, 217, 397–8.

morally intermediate status: the *hamartia* arises from that status, which makes it both moral and grounded in the agent's character. As far as the latter point is concerned, there are two opposite errors here that we need to avoid. On the one hand, there is the view encapsulated in the translation 'flaw', namely that *hamartia* just *is* character.<sup>31</sup> Against this, we should insist that character (*ēthos*) and tragic error (*hamartia*) are categorially distinct: character is a standing *disposition* (or set of dispositions); an error is an *action*. On the Aristotelo-Bradleian view, the tragic error, which is an action, *flows from* the relevant agent's character.<sup>32</sup> At the opposite extreme, the view that *ēthos* and *hamartia* have nothing to do with one another, and that a *hamartia* is a lapse committed by someone who is of generally good *ēthos*,<sup>33</sup> forfeits any link between character and action. In between these two unattractive extremes, we have (appropriately enough) the Aristotelian and the Bradleian and, I suggest, the correct view that *hamartia* and *ēthos* are indeed ontologically distinct, but that the former arises from the latter in a fully causal and comprehensible way. Christopher Gill argues (1986, 262) that in Sophocles' *Ajax* the moral character of Ajax is not a datum, but is itself the central problem of the play, and that this reading of it is non-Aristotelian. But there is no difficulty for Aristotle: if we accept Gill's interpretation of the play (as I think we should), an Aristotelian can say that the problematic nature of Ajax' *hamartia* leads back to the problematic status of his character, precisely because the *hamartia* arises naturally from his character. Peter Lamarque argues (2004, 275) that we should not think of *hamartia* as a 'fatal flaw' in character 'in a purely negative sense, for then the character would be somewhat less deserving of our sympathy. Rather, as Aristotle conceives it, *hamartia* is best thought of as a contingent by-product of otherwise admirable character traits—for example, the tendency of the courageous soldier to take especially unwise risks'. But the tendency of a soldier to take especially unwise risks is rashness, and in Aristotelian terms that *is* a flaw 'in a purely negative sense'.<sup>34</sup> Lamarque is right that, for Aristotle, tragic heroes must be admirable; but they must also, in his view, be flawed. Tragic economy would favour a connection between their flaws and what makes heroes admirable—and indeed a necessary connection, not mere contingency, as Lamarque suggests. That is just what we find in the tradition. For example, the tragedy of Euripides' *Hippolytus* consists, as W. S. Barrett remarks, 'in the fact that his downfall springs from a defect that is the reverse side of his very virtue: his cult of purity, for

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Sicherl 1977, 93.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Aristotle, *NE* 1127a27–8, 1127b2–3, 14–15; Bradley 1991, 29–30.

<sup>33</sup> See Gill 1986, 263; cf. 270–1.

<sup>34</sup> See Aristotle *NE* 1115b28–1116a9.

all its beauty and nobility, is bound up with an intolerant rejection of an essential part of human life' (1964, 391).

The relevant defects of character in tragic protagonists do not, as such, make them wicked. It is worth stressing this point, since one sometimes meets the contrary assertion. For example, Richard Waswo argues that Aristotle's doctrine of *hamartia* does not apply to Marlowe's Faustus or Shakespeare's Macbeth on the basis that 'If we regard the choice as guilty, then the terrible suffering which Faustus and Macbeth subsequently undergo is [sc. on Aristotle's view] merely the just punishment of bad men, which is not tragic' (1974, 64). But a choice can be wrong, even deeply wrong, without rendering the chooser wicked. It would be an opposite mistake to shy away from the full implications of the judgement that the tragic agent does indeed go wrong morally. Critics sometimes worry that, if we say this, we cast ourselves in a morally superior role, wagging a homiletic finger at the hero or heroine. But a judgement can be *moralizing* without being *moralistic*, in the pejorative sense of this latter word. The moralizing stance is inevitable: if I judge that you have made a moral mistake, I necessarily censure your action; to that extent I do take up a morally superior stance. It does not follow that I have to adopt a sanctimonious attitude towards you and your error, and indeed Aristotle's stress on the similarity to us of the tragic protagonist, and on the audience's feelings of fear and pity, precludes this. There is no inconsistency between the audience's censuring the tragic agent's conduct, and feeling sympathy for him or her: on Aristotle's view the spectator can, and does, do both.<sup>35</sup> (I shall return to these points in §5.)

I have argued that Aristotle intended his use of '*hamartia*' in *Poetics* 13 to be taken in a moralizing sense, against interpreters who deny that a *hamartia* is a moral mistake. Brian Vickers, following Gerald Else, holds that '*hamartia*' can only mean 'ignorance of the identity of a blood relative' (1973, 61). (Vickers is influenced by Aristotle's examples, to which I shall come in due course.) Dodds gives a slightly less restrictive account of *hamartia*, writing that 'it is almost certain that Aristotle was using "*hamartia*" here [in *Poetics* 13] as he uses "*hamartēma*" in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1135b12) and in the *Rhetoric* (1374b6), to mean an offence committed in ignorance of some material fact and therefore free from *ponēria* or *kakia*'.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, Dodds's cross-reference is inexact. If we look at what Aristotle actually says in the first of the passages that we are referred to, *NE* V, 8, we find a

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<sup>35</sup> See Schmitt 1994, 331, 341–2; 2014, 5 n. 13; 2015, 227–31, 234, 237, 240; Kappl 2015, 72.

<sup>36</sup> Dodds 1973, 67; cf. Dewar-Watson 2014, 54.

threefold distinction among kinds of harm (*blabai*) between *atuchēmata*, *hamartēmata*, and *adikēmata*, this last species being further divided into two subspecies (1135b11–25).<sup>37</sup> When the harm is accompanied by the ignorance of the agent, and could not have been foreseen, Aristotle tells us that it is a stroke of bad luck, an *atuchēma*; at the other extreme, we have acts of injustice, *adikēmata*, performed by unjust and wicked agents, *adikoi* and *ponēroi*. Aristotle distinguishes two intermediate cases: on the one hand there are mistakes, *hamartēmata*, which are like *atuchēmata* except that they could have been foreseen; on the other hand there are acts of injustice, *adikēmata*, which are unlike extreme such acts, in that the agent did the critical deed without wickedness. In this latter case the agent knows what he is doing, but he does not do what he does as a result of prior deliberation; he is therefore not wicked. He acts, Aristotle informs us, as a consequence of anger or another passion. Agents who slip up in this way, we are told, are *hamartanontes* (that is, they commit a *hamartia*); in fact they are described in very similar terms to akratics, that is, weak-willed agents.<sup>38</sup>

Of these four types of harm, the two intermediate cases are clearly both relevant to *Poetics* 13, whereas *adikēmata* performed by wicked agents are ruled out as candidates for tragic *hamartiai*, as are *atuchēmata*, which do not occur by probability or necessity.<sup>39</sup> Examination of *NE* V, 8 reveals that not only what Aristotle expressly calls ‘*hamartēmata*’, but also *adikēmata* that are performed without deliberation or wickedness, and in respect of which, as we have just noted, Aristotle *also* uses the language of *hamartia*, correspond to the ‘*hamartia*’ of *Poetics* 13.<sup>40</sup> Such *adikēmata* are moral transgressions; but it is also true, as I have observed, that what Aristotle calls ‘*hamartēmata*’ at *NE* 1135b18—that is, those *blabai* that are like *atuchēmata* except that they could have been foreseen—are moral failings, precisely because, though the relevant consequences were *not* foreseen, they *could*—and, it is implied, *should*—have been foreseen.<sup>41</sup> So while Dodds is right that a *hamartia* is free from *kakia*, he is wrong to hold that this is because it is non-moral, limited to mere ‘ignorance of some material fact’.<sup>42</sup> It is also misleading to say that in *NE* V, 8 ‘*hamartia* and *hamartēma* are sharply distinguished from flaw or defect of character’.<sup>43</sup> They *are* distinguished in the

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Demosthenes XVIII, 274–5, with Harris 2004, 30.

<sup>38</sup> See Aristotle *NE* VII, 8, esp. 1151a10; Cessi 1987, *passim*; Lurje 2004, 337–8, 374; Schmitt 2011, 457–8; Kappl 2015, 52–5.

<sup>39</sup> Stinton 1990, 149–50, 156–7; Halliwell 1998, 208–10.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Thucydides III, 40, 1–2; Cessi 1987, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Harsh 1945, 52.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Aristotle *NE* 1125a17–23.

<sup>43</sup> M. Nussbaum 1986, 382; cf. 1992, 140.

sense that they are not *as such* flaws or defects of character; their ontological category is that of, broadly speaking, events. But they do, as we have seen, *arise from* such character traits. Again, when Artemis at the end of Euripides' *Hippolytus* (1334–5) tells the grief-stricken and repentant Theseus that 'ignorance acquits your *hamartia* of wickedness (*kakē*)', Barrett's comment on '*hamartia*' (ad loc.), that 'the word marks the action [of bringing about Hippolytus' death] as wrong without either condemning it or excusing it', is hardly coherent. Artemis allows that Theseus' ignorance excuses him of wickedness, that is, of committing Aristotle's extreme type of *adikēma*. But, overcome by passion, Theseus *did* commit Aristotle's milder form of *adikēma*; that *was* a *hamartia*, and as such it does attract censure. It is time to return to Oedipus. Stinton, like Dodds, thinks that Oedipus' *hamartia* was not of a moral nature, and that this shows that '*hamartia*' in *Poetics* 13 cannot be exclusively moral in sense;<sup>44</sup> but I shall now reject the premiss of this argument.

### 3 Oedipus and cognitive failure

Dodds's view, in agreement with Stinton, as we have just seen, is that, although he killed his father and married his mother, Oedipus is morally innocent. Many other commentators concur: Thomas Gould, opining that Aristotle's doctrine of *hamartia* was 'probably the worst blunder in the history of literary criticism', asserts that 'of all the plays that we have, ancient or modern, none is so specific and eloquent about the complete absence of any connection at all between the character of the protagonist and the consequences of his acts'; for William Empson, Sophocles' play is 'only a bad-luck story'; for John Gould the play 'has nothing to say about responsibility'; for Uta Korzeniewski Oedipus' fate is 'eine schreiende Ungerechtigkeit'; and so on.<sup>45</sup> Dodds indeed concedes that Sophocles' hero has faults, which are given ample airing during the stage action: he is 'proud and over-confident; he harbours unjustified suspicions against Teiresias and Creon', and he expresses scepticism about oracles (1973, 66). But these faults—we shall have to fill out Dodds's rather meagre inventory—are, in his view, irrelevant to the tragedy: 'Years before the action of the play begins, Oedipus was already an incestuous parricide; if that was a punishment for his unkind treatment of Creon, then the punishment preceded the crime—which is surely an odd kind of justice' (ibid.). I shall suggest (in Chapter 3) that 'oddities' of this kind may indeed be found in

<sup>44</sup> Stinton 1990, 150, 165–6; cf. Denniston and Page 1957, xxix n. 2.

<sup>45</sup> T. Gould 1965, 385–6; Empson 1986, 113; J. Gould 2001, 260; Korzeniewski 2003, 476. See also Schadewaldt 1960, 237; Schopenhauer 1986, §51 (vol. 1, 355); Kovacs 1987, 71–2; Vickers 1973, 497–8; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 203; Gill 1986, 264; Nicolai 1992, 63–4; M. Nussbaum 1992, 155; Sherman 1992, 178–80, 186, 189–90; White 1992, 224–5.

tragedy, but as far as the *Oedipus Rex* is concerned, let us assume with Dodds that the murder of Laius and marrying of Jocasta were not punishments for Oedipus' misconduct during the action of the play: these earlier offences (I shall come to their exact nature in due course) are punished in the denouement of the drama, but they are not to be regarded as being themselves punishments—not unless one agrees with Hugh Lloyd-Jones that, despite appearances, Sophocles intends the ancestral curse on the house of the Labdacids to be functional in the play.<sup>46</sup> But, though the curse might be held to be important in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (and perhaps in the *Oresteia*),<sup>47</sup> as well as in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* and *Orestes*, I agree with numerous commentators that it is of little significance to Sophocles' drama.<sup>48</sup>

What, then, is the moral connection between the parricide and incest, on the one hand, and the bad behaviour on stage, on the other? There appear to be two main possibilities: (i) the bad behaviour justifies his punishment at the end of the play; (ii) the bad behaviour shows the sort of person Oedipus is, and so was at the time of the acts of killing his father and marrying his mother. According to (ii), the bad behaviour explains how Oedipus could have been, and in fact was, responsible for those acts, and is therefore culpable. Some older moralizers might have been happy with (i), which involves the concept of poetic justice; but modern moralizers are careful to limit their position to (ii); they insist that, as I have said, Oedipus is punished for his *deeds* (of parricide and incest), but also that those deeds *flow from* his character, and that the stage action shows how Oedipus has the kind of character that plausibly would issue in ill-considered deeds.<sup>49</sup> Now the acts of parricide and incest occur, as Schiller complained to Goethe,<sup>50</sup> and as Aristotle had already pointed out, 'outside the drama on stage' (*Poetics* 1453b31–2), in the 'long time' of the play.<sup>51</sup> But that, as Aristotle notes, is true of crucial acts in other tragedies too: indeed we find it exemplified throughout the tradition, by for instance

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<sup>46</sup> Lloyd-Jones 1983, ch. 5; 1990, 202–7. Cf. Kierkegaard 1987, vol. 1, 150; Denniston and Page 1957, xxix. On Agamemnon, see further their commentary on 386ff.; Fraenkel 1978, vol. 3, 623–5. Cf. Easterling 1993a, 23–4.

<sup>47</sup> On the curse in *Seven Against Thebes*, see Hutchinson on 720–91, 723, 801f., and 842; Gill 1990, 24–7. On the *Oresteia*, see Lloyd-Jones 1990, 283–99; N. Hammond 1973, 395–8, 407–8.

<sup>48</sup> See Bowra 1945, 163–4; Dodds 1973, 69, 71; Vickers 1973, 496–7; Garvie 1986, xxvii–xxviii; Kirkwood 1994, 75; Kullmann 1994, 114; M. West 1999, 41–2; Finglass 2007, 236–8; Sewall-Rutter 2007, 61–7, 112–30; A. Boyle 2011, li–lii, 278; Sommerstein on Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 934–7; Bond on Euripides, *Heracles* 1258.

<sup>49</sup> Gillett and Hankey 2005, 276–8; cf. Edmunds 2006, 49–50.

<sup>50</sup> Letter of 2 Oct. 1797 (1992–2004, vol. 12, 330–1); cf. Billings 2014, 116.

<sup>51</sup> On the concept of 'long time', see Kirkwood 1994, 70; Honigmann 1997, 68–72; P. Hammond 2009, 152–3.

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Garnier's *Hippolyte*, Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, Bellini's *Norma*, and Büchner's *Dantons Tod*.<sup>52</sup> So prudent traditionalists will insist that it is no objection to their approach that the crucial *hamartiai* occur before the stage action begins.<sup>53</sup>

Now Oedipus is in some respects a good man; at any rate he is not a wicked man in the Aristotelian sense. But he has faults, which emerge during the action of the play, and these are highly relevant to his earlier deeds of parricide and incest. Dodds, as we have seen, mentions his overconfidence,<sup>54</sup> and his unjustified suspicions of Teiresias and Creon. These failings are both connected with his fabled swiftness of thought and action.<sup>55</sup> We first meet this characteristic as an apparently positive endowment: when the priest in the opening scene hesitantly recommends consulting an oracle to ascertain the cause of the plague, it turns out that Oedipus has already acted (69); by the time the chorus proposes summoning Teiresias, Oedipus has already done so (287).<sup>56</sup> But as the play develops, we realize that this speed of reaction has another and less satisfactory side to it, namely a tendency to react *too* swiftly and without proper reflection:<sup>57</sup> as the chorus puts it, 'the quick in counsel are not sure' (617, tr. Jebb). We see this aspect of Oedipus' character operating in the interviews with Teiresias and Creon—for he ignores the fact that hitherto Creon has been a trustworthy friend (385) and Teiresias a good seer (300–1)<sup>58</sup>—and in the accusation of arrogance that he directs at Jocasta, when she has discerned the truth.<sup>59</sup> But the key failing that is responsible for Oedipus' tragedy lies in what his precipitate behaviour signals, namely cognitive deficiency—the burden carried, I suggest, by the great majority of tragic heroes and heroines in the Western tradition. Moreover, Oedipus' intellectual deficits are not the reverse side of an intellectual strength, because, contrary to what numerous commentators have asserted, he does not have any such strength.

Dodds does not mention Oedipus' cognitive defects, because like so many others—both characters in the play and readers and spectators of it—he is dazzled by Oedipus' reputation for intellectual prowess. Thus Maurice Bowra talks of Oedipus as 'a man of powerful

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<sup>52</sup> Aristotle *NE* 1101a31–3; Pocock 1973, 99; Mohamed 2005; Garvie 2009, 142; T. Gregory 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Kaufmann 1968, 119–20.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. Schmitt 1988b, 19, 26.

<sup>55</sup> Dawe on Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 619.

<sup>56</sup> See Knox 1998, 15.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Flaig 1998, 118–22.

<sup>58</sup> Schmitt 1988b, 16. *Contra* Ahrens Dorf 2009, 12–13 n. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Schmitt 2014, 48.

intelligence’, having ‘the gift of reaching rapidly the answer to a problem, of asking pertinent questions’; he has ‘vigorous mental equipment’, is ‘keen-witted and live-minded’; Bernard Knox tells us that Oedipus ‘has a brilliant intellect’; Brian Vickers that he is a ‘supremely active and intelligent man’; R. P. Winnington-Ingram that he is ‘the most intelligent of men’; Charles Segal that he has ‘extraordinary intelligence’ and is ‘an expert at decoding difficult messages’; Simon Goldhill that he is ‘a man of domineering intelligence and powerful scrutinizing mind’; Hans-Dieter Gelfert that Oedipus goes about his investigation ‘like a sharp-witted detective’; R. D. Dawe that he is ‘the most far-sighted of men . . . with a brilliant incisive intellect’; Vayos Liapis that he is ‘one of the finest specimens of human intelligence’; Peter Holbrook that he is ‘an intellectual prodigy’ with a ‘preternatural intelligence’.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, many commentators have thought that the play presents Oedipus as someone dedicated to finding the truth,<sup>61</sup> and have expatiated on his ‘epistemophilic passion to lay bare his own origins’, as Terry Eagleton nicely puts it (2003, 233). Jean-Joseph Goux even thinks that Oedipus ‘inaugurait la conscience philosophique’ (1990, 140). The list of commentators who have been staggered by Oedipus’ alleged intellectual brilliance could be considerably extended.<sup>62</sup>

These accolades demonstrate how easy it is for critics to find what they want or expect to find, regardless of the evidence before them. In reality Sophocles’ drama shows Oedipus unintelligently avoiding the truth, which is right under his nose, for as long as possible; it shows him to be fixated on the near in time and place, to lack the imagination and ability to entertain different and alternative possibilities, to weigh and compare probabilities, and to marshal correctly the information that he has at his disposal.<sup>63</sup> Bowra concedes, as most critics do and as anyone indeed must, that ‘despite his acute intelligence [Oedipus] is unable to see the truth until it is forced upon him’ (1945, 191), but it does not occur to him or to like-minded critics that Oedipus’ tardiness on the uptake could imply that the characterization of his intellect as ‘acute’ might be in need of revision. Again, if you start from the assumption that Oedipus has a ‘brilliant incisive intellect’, as Dawe does, then you will inevitably find

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<sup>60</sup> Bowra 1945, 190; Knox 1964, 29; Vickers 1973, 498; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 203; Segal 1981, 210, 241; Goldhill 1986a, 209; Gelfert 1995, 41; Dawe 2006, 16–17, 76; Liapis 2012b, 92; Holbrook 2015, 11, 15.

<sup>61</sup> See e.g. Bowra 1945, 190; Knox 1998, 117.

<sup>62</sup> See e.g. Whitman 1951, ch. 7, esp. 131, 138; Segal 1986a, 66; J. Schmidt 1989, 39; Nicolai 1992, 64; Nickau 1994, 21; Ahrens Dorf 2009, 10 n. 5.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Poole 1987, 95–6; Cessi 1987, 261, 267; Schmitt 1988b, 20, 22; 2016, 6–7, 13; Daniels 2006; Hall 2012, 306–9.

the Teiresias scene dramatically unsatisfactory: ‘the apparent failure of the highly intelligent Oedipus to grasp what has been said to him is unconvincing; and the structure of the plot suffers from premature disclosure’ (2006, 9). But Dawe does not ask himself what the dramatic point of the ‘premature disclosure’ might be, or whether the fact that he finds the Teiresias scene unconvincing might be a function of his initial assumption that Oedipus is highly intelligent rather than an indication of Sophocles’ poor draughtsmanship. He puzzles over the fact that ‘a man whose intuitive brilliance had solved the riddle of the Sphinx’ (to which I shall come in §4) is unable to put together the pieces of information before him in the obvious, and correct, way—pieces of information which ‘should have led even the least gifted intelligence to the right conclusion’ (ibid., 16). But it does not strike him that it might be worth re-examining his initial assumption that Oedipus is a man of ‘intuitive brilliance’. We find a similar effect in some versions of the Faust story, such as Marlowe’s, whose Faustus is cried up, by him and his students, as a cerebral prodigy, though what we actually see on stage, in his dialogues with Mephostophilis, is intellectual folly and a rash willingness to make a conspicuously bad bargain.<sup>64</sup>

Oedipus’ cognitive failure emerges most impressively from Sophocles’ drama in the way we find an almost exact match between the information that the hero receives, quite early on in the story, about the circumstances of Laius’ death, and what he already knows about his own past: yet he fails to make the not-very-demanding mental leap and put the pieces together in the obvious way until near the end of the play.<sup>65</sup> Lefèvre sets out some of the correspondences:<sup>66</sup> Jocasta tells Oedipus that Laius received an oracle that he would be killed by his son (711–14); Oedipus already knows that he received an oracle that he would kill his father (793). She tells him that Laius was killed at a crossroads (715–16); he already knows that he killed an older man at a crossroads (800–13). She tells him that Laius’ son had his ankles fastened together (718); Oedipus knows that just this fate befell him (1032–3). To Lefèvre’s list we can add that Oedipus hears from Creon and Jocasta that Laius was accompanied by a retinue, all of whom were killed except for one man who escaped and reported the incident in Thebes (106–19, 750–6); Oedipus already knows that in the fracas with the elder in the carriage whom he killed, he also slew several others—all the others, as he thought (800–13). Now one does not have to have read Aristotle on reciprocal relations to

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<sup>64</sup> Cf. H. Levin 1961, 158; Waswo 1974, 85–9; M. Burnett 2010, 165–70; Holbrook 2015, 110–12.

<sup>65</sup> See Schmitt 1997, 25.

<sup>66</sup> Lefèvre 2001, 125. Cf. Schmitt 1988b, 13; Flaig 1998, 65–7; Dawe 2006, 16.

put these pieces of information together in the obvious way. But instead of doing that, Oedipus grasps at straws and fantasizes about possible escape routes: he does not, it is true, make anything of the discrepancy between his own recollection of having killed all his opponents in the crossroads incident, and the fact that one man survived from the Laius incident,<sup>67</sup> but he does dwell on the discrepancy between the survivor's report of robbers, in the plural, and his own singular identity. Further, as Voltaire observed,<sup>68</sup> Teiresias accuses Oedipus in precisely the terms of the Delphic oracle that Oedipus had received (457–60, 791–3). Why did Sophocles show his hand so early in the play—why did he engage in what, as we have seen, Dawe censures as ‘premature disclosure’—if not to cast an unflattering light on his hero's intelligence? That is the point of the Teiresias episode: seeing blind man meets blind seeing man.<sup>69</sup> When Oedipus hears from Creon that one of Laius' retinue survived the incident in which Laius himself died, why does he not send for the survivor?<sup>70</sup> Why has he not investigated the circumstances of Laius' murder?<sup>71</sup> Why, when he comes to understand that he slew Laius and married his wife, does Oedipus extract from these facts no more than the thought that he slew *the Theban king* and married *that man's wife* (813–22)?<sup>72</sup> For although all the bits of the puzzle are on the table, and fit together in an obvious way, Oedipus *still* thinks that Polybus and Merope are his parents.

In line with what was said in the last section, we should insist that the canny traditionalist critic will not leap to the conclusion that Oedipus is being punished for the cognitive deficiencies that he displays on stage, but rather that we are supposed to infer that he evinced those deficiencies at a crucial earlier point—namely at the time when he killed his father and married his mother. Just so, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the hero is not punished for treading on the tapestries but for earlier acts in the ‘long time’ of the play, and which emanated from the same hubristic mentality as Agamemnon shows in the ‘carpet scene’.<sup>73</sup> Now Sophocles' Oedipus tells us himself that he killed the elder at the crossroads in an access of passion,<sup>74</sup> and it is clear from the description of the act of homicide that, as I shall argue below (§5), his response to the provocation he thought he had received was not an act of reasonable self-

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. Dawe on 813.

<sup>68</sup> See Reynaud and Thirouin 2004, 192; Mueller 1980, 110.

<sup>69</sup> Segal 1994, 74; Lefèvre 2001, 122–3; Garvie 2016, 43.

<sup>70</sup> Lefèvre 2001, 129.

<sup>71</sup> Flashar 1994, 64.

<sup>72</sup> Lefèvre 2001, 126. Cf. Dawe on 814.

<sup>73</sup> Winnington-Ingram 1983, 78–100; cf. M. Edwards 1978, 29.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Pack 1939, 354; Cessi 1987, 262; Schmitt 1988b, 14–15; Flashar 1994, 68.

defence on his part, but an irrational and culpable overreaction to what had in fact been normal behaviour on the part of his victims. As a student of mine put it: ‘he killed his dad in a fit of road rage’.<sup>75</sup> But more important than this point is the fact that Oedipus had the insouciance to get himself into the position, in the first place, of killing a man old enough to be his father and marrying a woman old enough to be his mother, not long after he had received Apollo’s prediction;<sup>76</sup> by contrast, in Grillparzer’s *Die Ahnfrau*, Jaromir, who kills his own father, is given no such forewarning. (The twin facts that Laius was old enough to be Oedipus’ father and Jocasta old enough to be his mother are not given any emphasis by Sophocles, but that is because he they would be familiar to the audience as elements of the myth.)<sup>77</sup> Oedipus’ outbursts of passion during the stage action, his tendency to react too precipitately, his short-sightedness, his failure to exercise his supposed intelligence—these things are there in the play to apprise us of the fact that they have always been there as features of Oedipus’ character, and were responsible for the acts of parricide and incest in the ‘long time’ of the drama.<sup>78</sup> Those who assert that there is no connection between Oedipus’ behaviour on stage and his former crimes<sup>79</sup> must answer a simple question: what, then, is the dramatic purpose of Oedipus’ bad behaviour on stage? Why has Sophocles portrayed him as the sort of person who *would*, unthinkingly and akratically, murder his father and marry his mother, if not to indicate that this is exactly what he *did*? It seems insufficient to say that the point of portraying Oedipus as short-tempered is merely to help elicit the emotions of pity and fear in the audience, as they observe someone like themselves suffering catastrophe.<sup>80</sup> More than that must be at stake.

#### 4 Oedipus and Enlightenment values

The prediction that Oedipus received from Apollo’s oracle was a response to his question: are Polybus and Merope my parents? Instead of answering this question directly, Apollo replied, as we noted at the beginning of the chapter, evasively, telling Oedipus that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother. Apollo’s failure, like the occasional exam candidate’s, to answer the precise question set speaks volumes to us, and should have done so to Oedipus

<sup>75</sup> M. West got there first: 1999, 39; cf. Young 2013, 132.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Harsh 1945, 48; Greiner 2012, 43, 51; T. Mann 2012d, 250–1.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1180–95, with Bain 1993, 88–9.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Lefèvre 2001, 136; Scodel 2005, 240–1.

<sup>79</sup> So e.g. von Fritz 1962, 11, 26; Stinton 1990, 163.

<sup>80</sup> So M. Nussbaum 1986, 387–8.

too.<sup>81</sup> Oedipus now has three indications that his apparent parents may not be his real parents: the drunkard's words at the feast, calling his origins into question (779–80), Polybus' and Merope's failure to allay his doubts (781–6)—in the Enescu/Fleg *Œdipe*, Merope lies to Oedipus—and Apollo's similar refusal to answer a straight question about his parentage (788–9).<sup>82</sup> The significance of the first piece of evidence is no doubt hard to assess: it might be worthless (on the other hand, *in vino veritas*).<sup>83</sup> But the latter two pieces of evidence have a very high value. An intellectually alert person would put these indications together, infer that Polybus and Merope were in all likelihood *not* his real parents—or at least that this was a distinct possibility—and then return to Corinth, at the same time making a mental note of the fact that he must, under no circumstances, kill a man old enough to be his father or marry a woman old enough to be his mother. Instead, Oedipus takes to the open road and performs the contra-indicated acts in short order. That Oedipus really knows that his parentage is doubtful is indeed shown by his anxious question to Teiresias (438): 'Who bore me?'<sup>84</sup> Those who insist on Oedipus' moral innocence on the basis that he did not know that the man he slew was his father and the woman he then married his mother are, I suggest, missing the point, which is that he *should have* known, or at least strongly suspected, that these identities held, and should have entertained these suspicions before he performed the actions of slaying and marrying. Putting the point in modern terms, we may say that he has *constructive knowledge* of these facts; that is, he is such, and the circumstances in which he finds himself are such, that he *ought to have* the relevant knowledge (and not just *dunamei*, but *energeiai*). Ignorance does not, as commentators so often think,<sup>85</sup> guarantee guiltlessness: it does not do so if it is *culpable* ignorance. (Note that constructive knowledge is distinct from repressed, or subconscious, knowledge, though Oedipus may have that too.)<sup>86</sup> It is not enough to say, as Vickers does (1973, 507), that the fact that Oedipus *believed* his parents to be Polybus and Merope and reasoned on that basis clears him of a charge of stupidity. We have to go further and ask whether he *should* have held those beliefs, whether an *intelligent* person would have done so; and the answer is, in both cases, negative. Vickers concedes that Oedipus 'does not ask enough questions' (*ibid.*, 511); but, like so many other critics, as we have seen, he does not think to retrace his steps and revise his view that Oedipus is 'a supremely . . . intelligent

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<sup>81</sup> Cf. Poole 1987, 101–3; *contra* Manuwald 1992, 15–17.

<sup>82</sup> Schmitt 1997, 32–3.

<sup>83</sup> See Horace, *Ars Poetica* 435, with Rudd *ad loc.*

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Schmitt 1988b, 21.

<sup>85</sup> So e.g. Vickers 1973, 499–500; Ahrens Dorf 2009, 13, 21.

<sup>86</sup> See Pucci 1992, 42–8.

man' (ibid., 498). By contrast with Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides may not have given the Oedipus of their versions any inkling of the doubtfulness of his parentage before he performed the acts of slaying Laius and marrying Jocasta.<sup>87</sup>

Before the 2003 Iraq War the US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld famously observed that 'There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.' What is striking about the remark is that, as Steven Pinker observes (2011, 514), Rumsfeld omits the fourth category, that of unknown knowns, things we do not know but should, or things knowledge of which we are suppressing. Hence a recurring theme of Rowan Williams's recent book on tragedy, namely that 'tragedy is about the effect upon us of what we do not know' (2016, 97) is too simple. Oedipus is a case in point: the crucial facts are, for him, unknown knowns. So Oedipus' offence, though in one way 'venial, because unwitting', as John Dover Wilson suggested, contrasting Oedipus' incest with Gertrude's (1964, 39), is very far from 'innocent', as Nussbaum calls it.<sup>88</sup> Butcher, as we have seen, concedes that 'in slaying Laius [Oedipus] was probably in some degree morally culpable'; but the act of marriage with Jocasta, he tells us, 'was a purely unconscious offence to which no kind of blame attached' (1951, 320). On the contrary, in his marrying of Jocasta as in his slaying of Laius Oedipus' cognitive failure was culpable; it is wrong to suggest that Oedipus exerted himself to avoid committing those crimes.<sup>89</sup> In fact he made very little effort, and the effort that he did make (not returning to Corinth) was misguided. Cognitive error is, or can be, morally blameworthy: we have obligations to find things out, to reason sensibly about information at our disposal, to draw conclusions that stare us in the face, to reckon with probabilities. So, to take another Sophoclean example, when Deianeira insouciantly makes use of the potion that Nessus gave her, she is cognitively at fault.<sup>90</sup> Of course, in one way those numerous commentators who laud Oedipus' intelligence are in a better position than I am to impute constructive knowledge to Oedipus and so hold him to account: they can say that he should have known the truth because he was clever enough to know it. But I can still make my point: Oedipus' lack of intelligence does not exempt him from asking questions that *anyone* should have asked.

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<sup>87</sup> A. Boyle 2011, lii–liii; Schmitt 2011, 481.

<sup>88</sup> M. Nussbaum 1986, 383; cf. Sorabji 1980, 297.

<sup>89</sup> So Ahrens Dorf 2009, 42.

<sup>90</sup> Lefèvre 2001, 17–26; *pace* Zeitlin 1996, 347. Cf. Hall 2009, 83–9.

The tendency to separate the cognitive from the moral should, as I have said, be resisted. Vickers is right that older attempts to preserve the notion of tragic flaw by cashing it out exclusively in terms of hubris fail (1973, 29–33), but the notion can be retained provided it is correctly analysed, and I suggest that ‘cognitive deficiency’ yields the desired analysis, with a correspondent understanding of *hamartia* as cognitive error. So Bywater’s translation of ‘*hamartia*’ as ‘error of judgement’ (1920, 50) was right: to speak, as I am doing, of ‘cognitive error’ does no more than modernize the terminology. An important Aristotelian point to make here, and one that in using the term ‘cognitive’ I presuppose throughout this study, is that the cognitive cannot be neatly separated from the appetitive or orectic.<sup>91</sup> Morality concerns, broadly speaking, perception—seeing things in a particular way. And these seen things are not motivationally inert. If, for example, I see that someone is in distress and needs help, that perception *already* motivates me to action (which is not to say that I will necessarily act, or even that I ought to act: there may be countervailing factors). As far as the notion of *hamartia* is concerned, a crucial implication of this point about cognition is that those tragic mistakes which we wish to account for in terms of the notion of *akrasia* (weakness of will)—and there are many such cases—do not form a separate category from that of cognitive error, but fall squarely within it. *Akrasia* is, speaking abstractly, a failure to see the facts in the right way—that is, in a way that exactly matches the perception of the virtuous agent.

If Oedipus’ reputation for intellectual brilliance is unmerited, how did he acquire it? The answer is that he alone solved the riddle of the Sphinx. At first blush this seems an impressive achievement, and not only other characters in the play but also critics of it are duly impressed. Further investigation reveals the matter to be less straightforward, however, and shows that Oedipus’ achievement against the Sphinx is compatible with the lack of intelligence that he elsewhere displays. For the Sphinx’s riddle played directly into Oedipus’ hands—or perhaps we should say that it played directly to his feet. If there was one sort of conundrum that a man of Oedipus’ background, character, obsessions—and, one might add, name, for one of the etymologies of his name makes Oedipus ‘the man who knows about feet’—was going to have a chance of solving, it was a riddle about feet. (Oedipus puns on this etymology of his name and obliquely alludes to the Sphinx’s riddle at line 397. The content of the riddle is not mentioned by Sophocles, but that is because it was well known: it

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<sup>91</sup> See McDowell 1998a, Essay 3 (esp. §§3 and 6); Gaskin 2001, 164–5; Halliwell 2012, 209.

seems to have been given in Euripides' *Oedipus*.)<sup>92</sup> So Oedipus 'got lucky': regrettably, it turned out to be a unique stroke of luck, which had the unfortunate consequence of distorting his and others' estimation of his abilities. The insight that Oedipus uncharacteristically displayed when he solved the Sphinx's riddle was not repeated, either before or after: it was not shown when, in spite of the triple warning he had received, he slew his father and bedded his mother, and it is not shown in the play as he gropes his way towards final understanding. Perhaps this is felt most strongly when Oedipus fails to respond to Jocasta's mentioning (718) that Laius' son had had his feet pierced (the fact that lay behind the alternative, more famous, etymology of his name, alluded to in the play by the Corinthian messenger).<sup>93</sup> Everyone in the audience solves that riddle, but not Oedipus. So when one critic writes that Sophocles' 'basic dramatic problem is to delay Oedipus' discovery without straining credibility or allowing Oedipus, the great solver of riddles, to appear a fool',<sup>94</sup> we should reply that Oedipus is meant to appear a fool; that in turn has implications for what we should say about his status as 'the great solver of riddles'. The first thing to say about that is that, contrary to what the plural 'riddles' insinuates, before the truth eventually dawns on him Oedipus has solved only one riddle.<sup>95</sup> (The inaccuracy has an interesting precedent in the dramas themselves.)<sup>96</sup> From the beginning of the play he carries around with him riddles about the scars on his feet, the identity of his parents, the identity of the man he killed and of the woman he married, his own identity—but he has solved none of them.<sup>97</sup> The second thing to say is that his solving of that single riddle was not a feat of superior intelligence, but a stroke of good luck—or rather of bad luck, as it turned out, indeed of tragic misfortune.

It follows that the play is not, as has often been held, in the business of mocking or subverting either analytical intelligence or Enlightenment values—Wolfgang Schadewaldt's *Dämonie des Wissenwollens um jeden Preis*—in the name of a *deus absconditus* or dim religious primitivism.<sup>98</sup> (Pascal's idea of a *deus absconditus* was famously exploited by Lucien

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<sup>92</sup> Euripides fr. 540a, with Collard, Cropp, and Gibert ad loc. See Benardete 1966, 106; Goldhill 1986a, 216–18; Pucci 1992, 35–8, 66–78; Rutherford 2012, 100–1; A.-B. Renger 2013, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1036; cf. 718, 1034. See also Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 26–7, with Mastrorarde ad loc.; Dover on Aristophanes, *Frogs* 1192.

<sup>94</sup> Scodel 1984, 63.

<sup>95</sup> Pace, too, Segal 1981, 207; D. Schmidt 2001, 151, 243.

<sup>96</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1525; Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 1688, 1759. Cf. Rutherford 2012, 74 n. 17.

<sup>97</sup> Daniels 2006, 563.

<sup>98</sup> Schadewaldt 1960, 281. For versions of this thesis, see T. Gould 1966, 505; Goldhill 1986a, ch. 8; J. Schmidt 1989; Nicolai 1992, 18, 64–5; Segal 1994, 88 (cf. 1986b, ch. 5); Rocco 1997, ch. 2; Knox

Goldmann in his interpretation of Racine;<sup>99</sup> I shall suggest in Chapter 4 that the idea has equally little plausibility in that case, too.) The *Oedipus Rex* gives no support to the Nietzschean idea that Aeschylus and Sophocles promulgate a deeply pessimistic, mysterian, irrationalist *Weltanschauung*, supposedly set against a Socratic rationalism and optimism popularized by Euripides.<sup>100</sup> Nor indeed does the *Antigone*, to which I turn in the next chapter.<sup>101</sup> Quite the reverse: in both these plays Sophocles precisely upholds Enlightenment values of pragmatic intelligence, by demonstrating how a failure to apply them leads to catastrophe.<sup>102</sup> The doctrine of *hamartia* is itself a fundamentally secularizing and rationalizing move on Aristotle's part,<sup>103</sup> so that its application to both the *Oedipus Rex* and (as I shall argue) the *Antigone* shows that these plays are in the service of the Enlightenment project. (There is an irony in Nietzsche's assertion that tragedy died of Socratism: Socrates himself, in the so-called passion dialogues, is in some ways a tragic figure,<sup>104</sup> who is himself brought down by cognitive failure.) Goldhill notes that in the play Oedipus is called the 'man of utmost mastery' (46) and suggests that 'even the man of utmost mastery cannot have mastery or control in all things. It is precisely the possibility of such total, all-embracing resourcefulness or knowledge or mastery that is challenged at the end of this drama'; Goux, developing his view of Oedipus as 'first philosopher' and precursor of Descartes, tells us that it is 'l'exaltation de l'élément raisonnable' that leads to catastrophe; Richard Rutherford may be gesturing at a similar idea when he writes (in Hegelian vein) that 'misguided heroes are often undone by their own strengths (Oedipus, Heracles)'.<sup>105</sup> We have seen that Rutherford's point can indeed be applied to Hippolytus. But it does not fit Oedipus: against Goldhill and Goux, we must say that Oedipus' resourcefulness and knowledge and mastery are *not* total or all-embracing; they fall a long way short of that, and this is exactly the problem. So Oedipus is not, in the main, undone by his strengths, but by his weaknesses. What we need in the *Oedipus Rex* is not less resourcefulness, but more; it is not the exaltation of *l'élément raisonnable* that we see in Oedipus, but its disastrous deficit.

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1998, 47–8; Grady 2009, 137–9; Greiner 2012, 49–50; A.-B. Renger 2013, 12–13; Rowan Williams 2016, 97, 102–5, 143, 158.

<sup>99</sup> Goldmann 1959, 45–9; 1970, 19.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Ahrens Dorf 2009, 2; Young 2013, 131–2. I shall return to Nietzsche in Ch. 3.

<sup>101</sup> Pace Burns 2002, 549.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Kullmann 1994, 113; Schmitt 1997, 25; 2014, 50–1.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. Halliwell 2005, 403; 2006, 137.

<sup>104</sup> Halliwell 2006, 124–7.

<sup>105</sup> Goldhill 1986a, 209–10; Goux 1990, 156; Rutherford 2012, 350; cf. Waswo 1974, 81. On Hegel, see Roche 2009, 54–5.

Oedipus' misapplication of rational thought—his failure of intellectual mastery—comes out especially clearly in the way he grasps desperately at the discrepancy, mentioned above, between the report of robbers, in the plural, given by the survivor of the brawl at the crossroads, and his own singular identity. Oedipus and the chorus both hope that this discrepancy will save him, but the survivor's account can only help if one reckons with the possibility that Laius and his entourage were killed by robbers and that, at more or less the same time and place, a similar elder, travelling with a similar entourage, was killed by Oedipus—a collocation of events that is not impossible, but hardly of sufficiently high probability to be worth taking seriously.<sup>106</sup> Oedipus snatches at the difference between plural and singular, as though that could be used to *prove* that he did not kill Laius. He deploys the point about singular and plural to *combat* the point about probabilities, as though the certainty that one man could not be identical with many outweighed the mere probability, not certainty, that the survivor's report and his own recollection might home in on the same incident. Ironically enough, despite his confidence in the numerical point, there is, as has often been observed, a sense in which the discoveries that Oedipus goes on to make show that one can be many:<sup>107</sup> just as Conscience assures the narrator of *Piers Plowman* that 'knyghte, kynge, conqueroure may be o persone' (XIX, 27), so too one man can be a homicide and a parricide, Thebes' saviour and its scourge, Laius' son and slayer, Jocasta's son and husband, the infant exposed on Mount Cithaeron and the 'child' of Polybus and Merope. Not that these identities upset the logical point, which is that one man cannot be *numerically* the same as many men. They simply trade on the fact that one object may instantiate many properties, together with the Fregean point that something which one thinks of under one mode of presentation may turn out, perhaps to one's surprise, to be identical with something which one thinks of under another mode of presentation.

Oedipus' confident belief that to reckon with the possibility that his slaying of an older man and entourage at a crossroads, on the one hand, and Laius' being slain together with his entourage at a crossroads by brigands, on the other, were one and the same incident is tantamount to supposing the realization of a metaphysical impossibility, namely that he is identical with several men, rather than merely showing the survivor of the latter incident to have been an unreliable witness (recall Hume on miracles: 1975, 109–31), is another aspect

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<sup>106</sup> Cf. Schmitt 1988b, 23; 2014, 24–5.

<sup>107</sup> Segal 1981, 215–16; Scodel 1984, 64; Zeitlin 1986, 111; Wilson 2004, 32–5; P. Hammond 2009, 77; Liapis 2012b, 90.

of his cognitive underperformance in the drama. Moreover, the possibility that the survivor might deliberately, perhaps for good reasons, have *falsified* the evidence does not occur to him, any more than, in his play, a parallel possibility does to Othello. In addition, Oedipus is more concerned with what the survivor said at the time than with what he might say now—that is, he is more concerned with confirming a convenient story than with finding out the truth. Notice also the shift, in their discussion of the *mêlée* at the crossroads, from Creon’s talk of ‘robbers’ (at 122) to Oedipus’ reference to a single ‘robber’ (at 124), a discrepancy picked up by Seneca.<sup>108</sup> It is almost as if Oedipus knows—really knows, that is, not just constructively knows. Or perhaps repressed knowledge is surfacing.<sup>109</sup> Dawe denies that we have to do with a Freudian slip (2006, 7). Be that as it may, the mere fact that Oedipus represents Creon’s plural as a singular should have alerted him to the possibility that the alleged plural *was* a singular. The move to the singular is, I suggest, the playwright’s way of notifying us that Oedipus had an obvious thought available to him which he failed to pursue. Some commentators try to defend Oedipus on the grounds that he is entitled to reckon with what are, after all, logical possibilities—namely that he is not identical with the son whom Laius exposed, or with Laius’ slayer(s), and so on.<sup>110</sup> But this misses the point. Of course the possibilities on which Oedipus pins his hopes *are* indeed bare possibilities. (A further bare possibility, not entertained by Sophocles’ Oedipus but neatly exploited by Corneille’s, is that the wayfarers whom he slew were identical with the ‘brigands’ who murdered Laius.)<sup>111</sup> But a cognitively alert person would have reckoned with the actual facts, as these turn out to be, at a much earlier stage of the investigation than Oedipus does—indeed well before the investigation began, namely at the time when he performed the fateful actions.

## 5 The murder of Laius

At this point we need to take cognizance of a subtlety which all commentators I have seen miss, though one or two get quite close.<sup>112</sup> Perhaps misled by an over-literal reading of *Poetics* 13 and the fact that the word ‘*hamartia*’ there occurs in the singular, critics ask what Oedipus’ *hamartia* is, and whether, once we have decided what it is, it is a *moral* mistake. But moralizers, as we have seen, maintain that Oedipus is punished not for his actions on stage but for the prior acts of parricide and incest, and these acts evidently constitute not one

<sup>108</sup> See A. Boyle on Seneca, *Oedipus* 221–2.

<sup>109</sup> Segal 1994, 74; cf. Garvie 2016, 44; Hutchinson on Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 756.

<sup>110</sup> So e.g. Manuwald 1992, 26; cf. Nickau 1994, 15.

<sup>111</sup> Corneille, *Œdipe* 389–90 (Reynaud and Thirouin 2004, 29–30); Edmunds 2006, 91.

<sup>112</sup> See Dacier 1692, 191; Harsh 1945, 53; Stinton 1990, 177–8; Rutherford 2001, 291.

*hamartia*, but at least two. I imply in that rider ('at least') that they might consist of more than two *hamartiai*, and the subtlety that we now have to register is the point that Oedipus' killing of Laius *already and on its own* consists of two *hamartiai*, before ever we get to the incest. For on the one hand what occurred between Oedipus and the elder at the crossroads was an act of homicide (indeed murder, as I shall argue below in this section), and on the other hand it was an act of parricide. In terms of the various kinds of harm that Aristotle lists at *NE* V, 8, the act of homicide (murder) is an *adikēma* that Oedipus performs with knowledge but without forethought, not out of inherent wickedness, but as a consequence of anger; the act of parricide, by contrast, counts in Aristotelian metaphysical theory as an *accidental property* (a *sumbebēkos*) of the killing,<sup>113</sup> and as a *hamartēma* that is like an *atuchēma* except that it could have been foreseen. This last point is crucial: that the killing of the elder turned out to be an act of parricide could have been foreseen by Oedipus, since he had just received an oracle to that effect; so the act of parricide was indeed a *hamartēma* and not a sheer *atuchēma*. It would be an *atuchēma* if it were unpredictable by the relevant agent; but in Oedipus' case that is not so.<sup>114</sup> Oedipus' tragedy is that, while he indeed intended to kill *a man*, in a fit of rage issuing from a flawed nature and precipitating a culpable action, he did not intend to kill *his father*. But the killing *was* nevertheless an act of parricide, and predictably so; that act of parricide polluted Oedipus, and it is what he is punished for.

Does Oedipus deserve his fate? One answer to this question, building on elements of Aristotle and Bradley and on what I have just said, might go as follows. Oedipus is unlucky inasmuch as an act for which he is fully responsible and which deserves punishment, namely homicide (murder), accidentally coincided with an act, namely parricide, for which he is at least partially responsible, given his state of knowledge, but which then draws down a punishment in excess of his strict deserts. On this view, Oedipus does indeed deserve punishment, but not to the extent that he receives it,<sup>115</sup> an imbalance which is held by both Aristotle and Bradley to be an important feature of tragedy,<sup>116</sup> and which is identified by Nietzsche as something that marks out ancient tragedy, by contrast with Christian thought.<sup>117</sup> So too, someone might wish to say, with Virgil's tragic Dido, who blames herself for her fall and judges that she deserves death: on the view I am considering she would be right in the

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<sup>113</sup> Heath 1991, 392.

<sup>114</sup> Pace Heath 1991, 392–3, 395.

<sup>115</sup> See Cessi 1987, 262; Schmitt 1990, 92–9; Gelfert 1995, 14; Lefèvre 2001, 7.

<sup>116</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* 1453a4; Bradley 1991, 46; cf. Moles 1984, 49; Gadamer 1990, 136.

<sup>117</sup> See *Morgenröthe*, §78 (1999b, 76–7); Gadamer 1990, 136–7.

first part, but at least partially wrong in the second.<sup>118</sup> Hera thought that Heracles deserved the terrible fate that he meets in Euripides' *Heracles*, but an adherent of the view I am currently airing might argue that we, the audience, can see that, though he brings his fate on himself and is therefore culpable (see further below, §§6 and 8), the punishment goes beyond the strict terms of the offence. In the first instance, we might say, divine justice is not human justice: it is not, from our point of view, morally ideal.<sup>119</sup> (What this would in turn come to, in the light of the naturalizing move that I shall urge in §8, is that *the world* is not morally ideal.) In Seneca's *Hercules Furens* the protagonist thinks that Juno is punishing him (604); but though Hercules is, as John Fitch says, 'brutal and hubristic' (1987, 276), we might again think that the punishment exceeded the offence. In connection with Dionysus' punishment of the whole house of Cadmus for Agave's and Pentheus' sins, Dodds remarks that 'when great natural forces are outraged we can expect no nice adjustment of the punishment to the magnitude of the individual offence'.<sup>120</sup> On the view I am considering here, though the punishment is deserved to some extent, it exceeds strict desert, and so is partially just, partially unjust. (Incidentally, we should not, as is often done,<sup>121</sup> equate an *imbalance* between strict desert and punishment with *absolute* injustice.) The imbalance between suffering and desert can then explain why Oedipus' fate elicits the Aristotelian emotion of pity in the audience—pity for suffering that is in excess of what was strictly deserved (*Poetics* 1453a4).<sup>122</sup>

I have described one possible (in fact, in its general outline, quite common) view about the relation between desert and punishment, but our earlier discussion of constructive knowledge has already shown where it goes wrong. On the Aristotelo-Bradleian approach, the tragic hero(ine) is not wicked, but he or she does have defects of character; these defects do not, as such, *make* the hero(ine) wicked, but *do* they lead to mistakes which, even when these are of a sort that we might be inclined to call 'intellectual', are still morally culpable; the consequences of the critical actions were both foreseeable and avoidable, and a suitably vigilant agent would have foreseen and avoided them. Oedipus, though in one sense ignorant, had, as we have said, constructive knowledge of the relevant facts, and should have acted on

<sup>118</sup> See here *Aeneid* IV, 547–52, 696; cf. Rudd 1976, 36; Hejduk 2013, 149–50.

<sup>119</sup> See Lee 1982, 52–3.

<sup>120</sup> Dodds 1960, 237; cf. xlv; Stevens 1971, 235; Mastronarde 2010, 188–9.

<sup>121</sup> So e.g. Whitman 1951, 124; F. Lucas 1957, 119–20; Steiner 1961, 4–8, 127–9; von Fritz 1962, 7; Kaufmann 1968, 243–4; Lloyd-Jones 1983, 104.

<sup>122</sup> See Seidensticker 1982, 41; G. Edwards 1999, xxii–xxiii; M. Nussbaum 2001, 311–12; Konstan 2005, 50–4; Sternberg 2005, 21–2.

that knowledge. As Donald Mastronarde observes, the pejorative connotations of a word like ‘*amathēs*’ (‘ignorant’), which is often used in a moralizing sense, ‘derives from the implied (rationalistic and optimistic) belief that the ignorance is culpable and could have been cured by effort’.<sup>123</sup> This censure does not apply to all forms of ignorance, but it does apply—indeed, in morally significant cases, it applies truistically—to ignorance accompanied by constructive knowledge; and it is this combination that Oedipus exemplifies. Oedipus’ ignorance does not amount to wickedness because, put in Aristotelian terms, his ignorance is not of the major premisses of relevant practical syllogisms, but of minor premisses, which treat of particularities.<sup>124</sup> Still, his ignorance of these particularities is not adventitious, but grounded in character defects, so that he is genuinely at fault. In general, the agent’s mistake or mistakes produce consequences predictably: they arise according to Aristotle’s constraint of probability and necessity. It follows that the agent could and should have foreseen them.

Aristotelian pity is, we have said, keyed to a supposed mismatch of punishment and desert. But there is a good sense, as I have just implied, in which there is no such mismatch: the agent should have foreseen the consequences, or at least foreseen that there might be (serious and undesirable) consequences, of his action. In that sense, though the agent is not wicked, it is also the case that the punishment is not undeserved, so that there need be no moral deficit between desert and punishment, at least according to traditional conceptions of appropriate levels of punishment (which are harsher than ours). Does that mean that we cannot feel pity for the tragic hero? No. Pity need not be elicited by a feeling that the suffering is undeserved: though Aristotle at one point implies otherwise (*Rhetoric* 1385b13–16), there is no conflict between our feeling pity for a tragic agent and that agent’s exhibiting serious culpability.<sup>125</sup> Rowan Williams is quite wrong to say that ‘Explanation and compensation suggest that there is something somewhere that makes mourning inappropriate’ (2016, 119). Fully deserved suffering—so suffering which is both explicable and compensated (in advance) by fault; suffering, that is to say, which is subject to full moral redress—can be, and is, mourned. Mourning has a self-regarding aspect, but then we, who are in many cases no better than we should be, have reason to fear (Aristotle’s other tragic emotion: *Poetics* 1453a6) that a similar moral and intellectual failure, precipitating catastrophe, will befall us.

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<sup>123</sup> Mastronarde 1994, 260; cf. n. 8 above.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Heath 2011, 168–9.

<sup>125</sup> Heath 1987, 82–3; White 1992, 229; Allan and Kelly 2013, 102 n. 90. *Contra* M. Nussbaum 1986, 384; Halliwell 1998, 174; cf. 2006, 119–20. Nussbaum has since modified her position: 2008, 153.

If Oedipus was lucky with the Sphinx he was unlucky with the killing; and that is the kind of thing—at least in general terms—that could happen to anyone. Dodds’s verdict on the play, that ‘we feel both pity, for the fragile estate of man, and terror, for a world whose laws we do not understand’ (1973, 67) is too loose.<sup>126</sup> Our feelings of pity and fear are more precise than that. And it is unclear why Dodds finds the ‘laws’ of Sophocles’ world hard to understand. Given the coincidences, which, for Aristotle (*Metaphysics*, Δ. 30 and E. 2), are not a matter of law, everything happens quite smoothly, according to probability and necessity. Elsewhere, Dodds writes that ‘for Homer, as for early thought in general, there is no such thing as accident’ (1951, 6). Would this apply to the archaizing Sophocles? You might say that, in an *absolute* sense, there *is* no such thing as an accident, at least at the level of human affairs. For here it is plausible that accidents occur in ways that are *relative* to causal and explanatory chains. That was at any rate Aristotle’s view: for him accidents occur when, for example, things behave unexpectedly, given their usual characterizations, as when a cook doctors or a doctor cooks; or when two causal chains intersect, as when a creditor goes to market and unexpectedly meets his debtor, or a man in a besieged city leaves it to take a drink at an outside well and to his consternation finds enemy soldiers there, who kill him (as in some versions of Troilus’ death at the hands of Achilles).<sup>127</sup> For someone who knew enough about the ambient conditions, these coincidences could be predicted and would come as no surprise. For the Stoics, an accident is simply an event whose causes are hidden.<sup>128</sup> Now in Oedipus’ case, as we have in effect said, the act of parricide was not much of an accident, in Aristotle’s sense, so that it scarcely matters whether we extend Dodds’s point about early Greek thought to Sophocles or not. Given the oracle, Oedipus was in a position to predict with near certainty that any act of homicide that he subsequently committed on a significantly older man, unless he made a habit of performing such acts, was going also to be an act of parricide. It was in a relative sense an accident that he met Laius *there and then*, but it was not an accident in an absolute sense, and someone who knew enough about all the relevant causal chains could have predicted it, exactly as in the case of the man who leaves the besieged city and encounters his mortal enemy at the remote well. This is not to deny that there could be

<sup>126</sup> Cf. his verdict on Euripides’ *Bacchae* in his note on 1348–9; Manuwald 1992, 43.

<sup>127</sup> Boitani 1989a, 9–10. For discussion of these and similar examples, together with references to their sources in Aristotle and Alexander of Aphrodisias, see Gaskin 1995, ch. 14. The example from Aquinas that I quote there (205 n. 33), is rather close to the case of Oedipus. Cf. also Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae* V, pr. 1; J. Mann 2003, 98.

<sup>128</sup> Stobaeus, *Ecl.* I, 7, 9; Alexander of Aphrodisias, *De Fato* VIII (*Suppl. Arist.* II, 2, 174, 1–2); cf. Coleman 1990, 63 n. 44.

accidents in an absolute sense, a matter on which we need here take no stand; but, if there are such accidents, Laius' death is not one of them.

Dodds states that 'if Oedipus had been tried before an Athenian court he would have been acquitted—of murdering his father', and Jean-Pierre Vernant opines that Oedipus has not 'committed any crime of his own volition (*de plein gré*)', or 'intentionally (*intentionnellement*)', which could 'be personally imputed to him from a legal point of view'.<sup>129</sup> But here Dodds and Vernant slide over an important distinction that I have been at pains to stress. No doubt Oedipus would have been acquitted of an intention to commit *parricide*, but would he have been acquitted of *murder*—the intentional killing of a man? Well, whatever the verdict in our hypothetical case *would* have been, it emerges from the manner in which the fateful scene is described that Oedipus' behaviour on that occasion involved an overreaction which went well beyond self-defence—in fact I believe it is clear that Oedipus was not in any serious sense under attack from Laius or his retainers<sup>130</sup>—and that he was guilty of murder, so that in our hypothetical scenario the jury *ought not* to acquit him of that charge.<sup>131</sup> As Egon Flaig shows, Oedipus cannot plead self-defence, contrary to what his apologists have supposed.<sup>132</sup> (Contrast the versions of the killing of Laius described by Euripides' Jocasta in *Phoenician Women*, and by Cocteau's Œdipe in *La Machine Infernale*.)<sup>133</sup> Let us, following Flaig, reconstruct the scene at Sophocles' crossroads.

Laius' servants included a herald, who will have gone before the carriage in order to announce his master's coming and clear the route. He will accordingly have required Oedipus to give way, but Oedipus refused, thereby forcing the carriage to brake. In so behaving, Oedipus automatically put himself in the wrong, since it was an understood rule in all pre-modern societies that mere pedestrians, who would normally be members of the lower orders, had to yield passage to nobility riding on horseback or in vehicles. (This point, implicit in Sophocles, emerges explicitly in Euripides' version at *Phoenician Women* 39–41, where Laius' driver abruptly tells Oedipus to make way for royalty.) Anyone who flouted this convention could justifiably be regarded as a potential highwayman and treated

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<sup>129</sup> Dodds 1973, 71; Vernant in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2001, vol. 1, 71. Cf. Bowra 1945, 164–5, 168; Burkert 1991, 16.

<sup>130</sup> See Gottsched 2009, 102, with Lefèvre 2001, 119, 135. Cf. Flashar 1994, 66–7; Schmitt 1997, 39; 2014, 22–4. *Contra* Segal 2001, 58; Vernant in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2001, vol. 1, 110.

<sup>131</sup> So too Harris 2012, 292–5.

<sup>132</sup> Flaig 1998, 98–102, 110–12; cf. Redfield 1994, 72–5.

<sup>133</sup> Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 32–45; Cocteau 2012, p. 90.

appropriately; indeed highwaymen caught in the act could be killed with impunity.<sup>134</sup> Now, as it happened, *this* pedestrian was in fact—and exceptionally—a nobleman, but given that other travellers could not know of his exceptional status Oedipus incurred an obligation to play by the rules. So his refusal to get out of the way was the *primum malum* and a deliberate act of provocation. However, in spite of their entitlement to initiate physical violence, Laius and his entourage did not do so: by his own account, it was Oedipus himself who did that, striking the driver (807).<sup>135</sup> And, even if we ignore the blow to the driver, we should remind ourselves that when two parties engage in a quarrel that descends to physical violence, he who strikes first is not necessarily the true initiator of violence.<sup>136</sup> Melville's *Billy Budd* is a good illustration of this point; it is also understood by Goethe's Duke Alfonso of Ferrara when Tasso draws his sword against Antonio;<sup>137</sup> and Euripides' Medea tries to avail herself of the same point against Jason (1366, 1372). In fact Oedipus did strike first, in a physical sense, when he lashed out at the driver, but he also originated violence in a deeper sense by blocking the entourage's passage. Laius now retaliated, as he had by this stage more than good cause to do, hitting Oedipus on the head with his goad. This response was mild by comparison with what Laius and his retainers would have been entitled to mete out: at this point in the proceedings they would have been justified in inferring nefarious motives on the stranger's part, and killing him. Unfortunately for them, however, they did not do so, and Oedipus replied with disproportionate (810) and illegitimate force, in his rage killing Laius and all but one of his servants. It is a measure of his violence and excess that he caused these deaths not with a sword or spear, but with a staff. Oedipus in fact committed multiple murders. And the crucial point is that, as Flaig puts it, 'even if he did not wish deliberately to kill Laius *as his father*, he nevertheless did deliberately kill the man who coincidentally *was* his father' (1998, 101–2).

Michael Lurje's interpretation of the play hinges on the thesis that the kind of double *hamartia* I have outlined is impossible: given that the act of parricide was a *hamartēma*, the killing could not have been an *adikēma*, because we have to do with one and the same act, and the former description trumps and excludes the latter.<sup>138</sup> But an Aristotelian will not be

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<sup>134</sup> Aeschines I, 91.

<sup>135</sup> *Contra* Girard 2010, 106, 114–15.

<sup>136</sup> Aristotle, *NE* 1135b25–7.

<sup>137</sup> Goethe, *Torquato Tasso* II, 5 (1616–22; 1985–99, vol. 5, 779); the Princess and Eleonore understand it too: III, 1 (1661–9; *ibid.*, 781); Lampport 1990, 92.

<sup>138</sup> Lurje 2004, 321–34, 342, 384.

impressed by that reasoning: *qua* killing of his *father* Oedipus' act was a *hamartēma*, *qua* killing of a *man* it was an *adikēma*; these two aspects simply co-exist in balance and there is no question of one's trumping or excluding the other. Indeed Aristotle appears to imply almost exactly this, with Oedipus in mind, when he remarks, in the context of a distinction between voluntary and involuntary acts of striking, that 'the person struck may be the agent's father, though the agent knows only that he is a human being or one of the people present, and is unaware that he is his father'.<sup>139</sup> The so-called 'mixed actions' of *NE* III, 1 provide another model of how a single act can, in Aristotle's view, partake of both the voluntary and the involuntary: the captain who throws his cargo overboard in a storm acts involuntarily *simpliciter*, since he would not choose to be in the circumstances in which he finds himself; but relative to those circumstances his action is voluntary, since its moving principle lies in him and the particular action of jettisoning the cargo is not externally imposed. Such relativization of the correct characterization of a situation to the way it is viewed is staple Aristotelian fare. After the revelations of Oedipus' past, the chorus states (1213) that 'time the all-seeing hath found thee out in thy despite (*akonta*; tr. Jebb)'. Oedipus is characterized here as *akōn* (unintending, unwilling) because, although he pursued the investigation *hekōn* (intentionally, willingly), he did not intend the outcome, of which he was ignorant, and the outcome caused him grief and regret.<sup>140</sup> As comparison with Aristotle's discussion of the voluntary and involuntary shows, Oedipus' is a perfectly straightforward case of mixed *akousion* and *hekousion*.

## 6 Culpability, tragic heroes, and poetic justice

Dodds remarks that 'the theory that the tragic hero must have a grave moral flaw, and its mistaken ascription to Aristotle, has had a long and disastrous history. It was gratifying to Victorian critics, since it appeared to fit certain plays of Shakespeare' (1973, 67). I have argued that an Aristotelian *hamartia*, though not *identical with* a moral flaw, does *issue from* one. Moreover, the theory *does* fit certain plays of Shakespeare: as Bradley noted (1991, 28–31, 37, 45), Shakespeare's tragic heroes contribute to their own downfall, and they do so by performing (or omitting) actions of a fateful nature that express their character, so that if the action (or inaction) is flawed, that is because the underlying character is flawed. James Shapiro reads *Julius Caesar* as Hegel read the *Antigone*: 'Shakespeare didn't conceive of his tragedy in Aristotelian terms—that is, as a tragedy of the fall of a flawed great man—but

<sup>139</sup> *NE* 1135a28–30; tr. Crisp.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *NE* 1110b18–22.

rather as a collision of deeply held and irreconcilable principles, embodied in characters who are destroyed when these principles collide' (2005, 147). But Brutus *is* an Aristotelian hero, and his repeated misjudgements—his cognitive failures—are there to be seen on the surface of the work.<sup>141</sup> Butcher thought that Sophocles' Oedipus and Shakespeare's Othello 'differ [widely] in moral guilt' (1951, 322), but it is hard to see how this can be so, for they share the same basic flaw: culpable cognitive failure. In Oedipus' case the flaw takes the form of an inability to make proper use of information at his disposal; in Othello's case it takes the form of suggestibility and gullibility. Othello forgets that testimony is not cognitively equivalent to perception:<sup>142</sup> for in the case of testimony, unlike that of perception, there is an interface, an intermediary in the form of a human decision to act as a conduit of information (or misinformation), and this fact requires any sensible recipient to ask after the testimony giver's credentials and reliability. Even perception, though it does not involve an interface, can be unreliable, and misinterpreted, as *Othello* illustrates. (A similar point applies to Voltaire's *Zaïre*, which is partly based on *Othello*: Orosmane misconstrues the letter to Zaïre that his officers intercept.) That tragedians build flaws into their heroes is what you would expect; for, whether consciously or not, they prefer to conform to Aristotle's dictum that narrated events should arise by probability and necessity, as well as to a principle of sufficient reason along Leibnizian lines. And, as we have said (§2), the most satisfying explanation of a tragic hero's fall is that he brought it on himself.

Of the six tragic heroes that Aristotle lists in *Poetics* 13 as being the most effective—Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, and Telephus—we know from elsewhere in his *œuvre* that Aristotle thought at least two of them to be culpable, Alcmaeon and Orestes.<sup>143</sup> The presence in this list of Orestes, in particular, has always been a thorn in the side of those critics who take Aristotelian *hamartia* to be, or involve, a mere 'mistake of fact'—that is, for these critics, an essentially non-moral kind of ignorance.<sup>144</sup> (On the wider, realist-cognitivist view of morality that I, like Aristotle, am following, there is no harm in saying that a *hamartia* involves ignorance of matters of fact, so long as one remembers that the relevant facts may be moral in nature.) As for Thyestes, it is unclear which version of the myth Aristotle is thinking of, but it could be the famous story of Thyestes' seducing his

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<sup>141</sup> Miola 2000, 104; Liebler 2002, 140–1; Gaskin 2013a, 97–9; cf. Shapiro 2005, 163.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Gaskin 2006, 77–9.

<sup>143</sup> *NE* 1110a27–9, *Rhetoric* 1401a35–b3; cf. *NE* 1148a33–4; Harsh 1945, 48–9.

<sup>144</sup> See Kappl 2015, 62–3.

brother Atreus' wife Aerope, 'for which Atreus revenged himself by pretending to forgive Thyestes and then serving him up his children's flesh at a banquet', as D. W. Lucas reminds us (1972, 145). But if that is what Aristotle has in mind it is not true, as Lucas goes on to say, that the *only* instance of *hamartia* in the offing is the fact that Thyestes did not know what he was eating, for that interpretation depends on an exclusively non-moral conception of *hamartia*. In the *Laws*, Plato refers to the tragedies of Oedipus and Thyestes as involving just punishments for serious crimes, and there is a neat match between Thyestes and the figure in the *Republic*'s Myth of Er who greedily chooses the lot of the tyrant, only to find that he is destined to eat his own children. Destined—but when he understands his fate he bewails it, forgetting 'that his misfortunes were his own fault, blaming fate and heaven and anything but himself'.<sup>145</sup> So four of the six cases listed by Aristotle—Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, and Thyestes—seem to involve moral *hamartiai* and a hero who brings trouble on himself. The final two cases, Meleager and Telephus, may follow suit, though we do not know enough about the versions of their stories that Aristotle presupposed to be sure of this.

The pattern of culpable error balanced by punishment is exemplified by the majority, and the most important, of Greek tragic heroes and heroines, from Homer's Hector, Aeschylus' Xerxes, Eteocles, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and the Prometheus of the *Prometheus Vincitus*, through Sophocles' Antigone and Creon (theme of my next chapter), his Ajax, Heracles, and Deianeira, to Euripides' Medea, Hippolytus, Phaedra, and Pentheus, and the post-Euripidean Rhesus.<sup>146</sup> Even Euripides' mad Heracles, who in the view of some commentators fails to conform to this pattern,<sup>147</sup> can be fitted into it without strain, as the early Wilamowitz saw (though he later seems to have changed his mind)<sup>148</sup>—Seneca's mad Hercules still more so.<sup>149</sup> Similarly, in the Senecan *Hercules on Oeta* we find a heightening of Deianeira's guilt: not only does she initially wish to kill Hercules in revenge for his infidelity, but when she moves instead to the application of Nessus' supposed aphrodisiac,

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<sup>145</sup> Plato, *Laws* 838c1–7; *Republic* 619b7–c6, tr. Lee.

<sup>146</sup> See on these figures Harsh 1945, 54–5; Barrett 1964, 391, 403, 413–4; von Fritz 1962, 11–12; Bremer 1969, 120; Winnington-Ingram 1983, 32–8, 51–4, 78–100; Stinton 1990, 162–4, 176–9; Cairns 1993, 318–19 n. 202; Segal 1993, 150; J. Gregory 1997, 70–4; Lefèvre 2001, 11–26, 32–5, 48–62; Garvie 2009, xxix; Schmitt 2011, 446–55, 489–91; 2015, 215–18; Allan and Kelly 2013, 104, 108–9; Dodds on Euripides, *Bacchae* 1117–21; Hutchinson on Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 653–719; Griffith on [Aeschylus], *Prometheus Vincitus* 8–9.

<sup>147</sup> D. Lucas 1972, 141; J. Gregory 1977, 267–8 (but see 1997, 137–9); Gellrich 1988, 116, 119; Korzeniewski 2003, 477; Mastrorarde 2005, 325.

<sup>148</sup> Wilamowitz 1984, vol. 2, 128–9; 1935–72, vol. 1, 466. Cf. A. Burnett 1971, 168; Lee 1982.

<sup>149</sup> Fitch 1987, 28–30.

her culpable negligence in not suspecting treachery on the centaur's part is made even plainer than it is in Sophocles (see 716–21); though both the Nurse and Hyllas try to absolve her of guilt (884–6, 900–1, 982–3), she refuses to absolve herself. And Seneca's Thyestes, Agamemnon, and Medea are obvious exemplars of the type,<sup>150</sup> as is Virgil's Dido and Lucan's Pompey. Arguably Virgil's Turnus also exemplifies the type; possibly even, in some measure, his Aeneas.<sup>151</sup> After Seneca, we find the syndrome replicated throughout the entire European tragic tradition, as for instance by the Roland of the *Chanson*, Siegfried, Hagen, and Kriemhild in the *Nibelungenlied*, Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde and Henryson's Cresseid, Aretino's Celia (*Orazio*), Buchanan's Jephtha, Norton and Sackville's Gorboduc, Hughes's Arthur and Mordred (*The Misfortunes of Arthur*), Wilmot's Tancred, Gismund, and Palurin, Garnier's Thésée, Alabaster's Oromasdes (*Roxana*), Loctrine in the play of that name, Marlowe's Faustus, Shakespeare's Hamlet, Jonson's Sejanus, Webster's Duchess of Malfi, Beaumont and Fletcher's Evadne and Amintor (*The Maid's Tragedy*), Middleton and Rowley's Beatrice (*The Changeling*), Milton's Samson, Corneille's Suréna, Racine's Phèdre, Voltaire's Tancrède, Lessing's Emilia Galotti, Goethe's Götz von Berlichingen, Schiller's Wallenstein, Kleist's Penthesilea, Hebbel's Agnes Bernauer, Büchner's Danton, Grillparzer's Rahel, George Eliot's Lydgate, Hardy's Michael Henchard, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina, Flaubert's Madame Bovary, Ibsen's Hjalmar (*Wild Duck*), Strindberg's Miss Julie, and Synge's Deirdre of the Sorrows. This list does not aim at anything like completeness, but is simply meant to indicate the range of applicability of the *hamartia* doctrine. (For example, the model applies not just to Hamlet, but to all of Shakespeare's tragic heroes.) I have already briefly mentioned Faustus and Samson, and shall say more about a number of other cases in the above list in due course, especially some of the more controversial ones.

Dodds traces the idea he is attacking to 'older nonsense about "poetic justice" ', an idea which he says is 'completely foreign to Aristotle and to the practice of the Greek dramatists'.<sup>152</sup> The idea of *poetic* justice is the idea that rewards and punishments are distributed to the good and bad respectively not as a consequence of a procedure—that would be *legal* justice—but by chance: the charitable woman wins the lottery; the felon falls off a cliff. So 'poetic justice' is a technical term with a precise meaning: a case of justice in a poem is not *eo ipso* a case of poetic justice. Now the notion of poetic justice is arguably not foreign

<sup>150</sup> See Schiesaro 2009, 224–5; Lefèvre 2015, 238–9, 281, 285–6.

<sup>151</sup> See Gaskin 1992 and [forthcoming] for argument on these points and further references.

<sup>152</sup> Dodds 1973, 67–8. So too Lloyd-Jones 1990, 201–2; Nuttall 1996, 34 (cf. 95).

to Aristotle, given that the concept of the *philanthrōpon*—that which satisfies human feeling, an idea which is very close to the idea of poetic justice—is aired in *Poetics* 13, and seems to be almost as important to him as the concepts of pity and fear.<sup>153</sup> Still, whatever we should say about the practice of the Greek dramatists in general, I agree with Dodds, and have in effect argued here, that poetic justice plays no role in the *Oedipus Rex*: the faults that Oedipus discloses during the dramatic action of that work are not there to justify his punishment in any poetic sense, but to reveal his character—a character that at an earlier stage in the story *did* produce actions that were punishable, and are now to be punished. Stinton suggests that a thesis which I argued for above, namely that *hamartia* serves to measure the moral distance between the intermediate tragic hero and the fully virtuous person, is ‘a fatal step, if it leads (as it has sometimes led) to crediting—or debiting—Aristotle with the notion of poetic justice’ (1990, 165). But there is no need for this undesirable consequence to ensue. It is true that the hero’s *hamartia* in a given tragedy *could* be in the service of poetic justice, because there *might* be no causal connection between that *hamartia* and the hero’s punishment: the *hamartia* could be there simply to make the audience feel comfortable with that punishment in a non-legalistic way. But that is not, I suggest, either Aristotle’s recommendation or Sophocles’ policy in the *Oedipus Rex* or what we find in the tragic tradition generally. As I have argued, dramatic economy favours an appropriate causal connection between the hero’s moral deficiencies and catastrophe, and that is what we find in the case of Oedipus and most tragic hero(in)es. On the one hand *hamartia* expresses character; on the other hand it precipitates punishment.

## 7 Oedipus and freedom

Is Oedipus free? Dodds’s position on this question is straightforwardly inconsistent.<sup>154</sup> In the first section of ‘On Misunderstanding *Oedipus Rex*’, where he argues against the moralizing interpretation, Dodds claims that Oedipus was not free to act otherwise in slaying his father and marrying his mother, because that was what the oracle had unconditionally predicted that he would do. But in rebutting the idea that the play is a ‘tragedy of destiny’, in the second section of his essay, he proceeds to urge the precise opposite, namely that Oedipus *was* free to act otherwise, because, as it is now conceded, divine foreknowledge does not amount to divine determination. Dodds’s second position is much better than his first. For the

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<sup>153</sup> I follow Schadewaldt 1960, 353–4; D. Lucas 1972, 142; Flashar 1984, 11. But against this construal of ‘*to philanthrōpon*’, see Lessing 1996, vol. 4, 585, 591; Halliwell 1998, 219 n. 25.

<sup>154</sup> See T. Gould 1966, 479–80; Kovacs 2009, 358–9.

suggestion that since the oracle was unconditional Oedipus could not have avoided his fate involves a modal error. From the fact that Oedipus *will* do such and such—that is what the oracle predicts—it does not follow that he *must* do such and such. The divine being can predict human free action without undermining that freedom, because it has factored in to its prediction not only the results of the human agent’s free deliberation, but also the effect of its making the prediction and of its revealing the prediction to that human agent in advance, if it does. (Similarly, Christ’s prediction to Peter that he would deny him three times takes account of the fact that Peter hears the prediction; when the time comes, Peter’s denials are free.)<sup>155</sup> Hence Oedipus can be free *not* to do what he is predicted—and predicted with absolute certainty—to do. For if he *were* not to do what he is predicted to do, then the oracle *would not* have made that prediction. The oracle merely knows that Oedipus will do such and such, not that he must do it, and knows also that divulging the prediction to the human agent will not affect—indeed will exactly contribute to the bringing about of—that outcome: in mathematical terms the prediction of that action is a fixed point. As Boethius noted, God’s seeing that I will do something no more detracts from my freedom than my seeing you doing something now detracts from yours.<sup>156</sup> And it would be a species of category error to suggest here that Oedipus could not have acted otherwise because the myth was settled and known and Sophocles could not change it: the myth may have been fixed and familiar to all, but in that fixed myth Oedipus acted freely; it is a fixed story about freedom.<sup>157</sup>

It might be objected to my argument of the previous paragraph that it ignores an important historical and an equally important linguistic point. The historical point would be that, even if it is a modal error to confuse ‘will’ and ‘must’, it is an error that many people have committed, including most famously Aristotle. In the ninth chapter of *De Interpretatione*, Aristotle—at least according to the traditional interpretation of this passage<sup>158</sup>—feels obliged to restrict, with respect to statements about future contingencies, the principle that every statement is either true or false, on the grounds that if statements about the future were true (false) the corresponding events would thereby be rendered necessary (impossible). So, it might be said, if Aristotle can infer a ‘must’ from a ‘will’, it would hardly be surprising if

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Dodds 1973, 70–1; N. Hammond 1973, 399; Knox 1998, 39–40.

<sup>156</sup> Boethius, *Consolatio Philosophiae* V, pr. 4 and 6; cf. Dante, *Paradiso* XVII, 37–42; Lorriss and Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose* 17401–24; Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* IV, 960–1082; Marston, *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* II, 1, 131–5; J. Mann 2003, 96–8.

<sup>157</sup> The category mistake is surprisingly common: see e.g. Flashar 1994, 67; 2000, 115; McLuskie 2003, 396; Smith 2016, 93–5, 100.

<sup>158</sup> I defend this interpretation, with nuances, in Gaskin 1995, chs. 1–12. See also MacFarlane 2003.

Sophocles did so too. The linguistic point is this. It is sometimes claimed that the oracle that Oedipus receives from Apollo is expressed in ‘must’ terms.<sup>159</sup> Oedipus tells Jocasta that Apollo prophesied terrible things for him, ‘even that I was fated (*chreiē*) to defile my mother’s bed; and that I should show (*dēlōsoim*) unto men a brood which they could not endure to behold; and that I should be (*esoimēn*) the slayer of the sire who begat me’ (791–3, tr. Jebb). Jebb translates the crucial impersonal verb ‘*chrē*’ (here occurring in the optative form ‘*chreiē*’) as ‘is fated’, which is a standard rendering (Lloyd-Jones has ‘was destined’).<sup>160</sup> Note that Sophocles also uses future tenses (*dēlōsoim*, *esoimēn*) for what Apollo says Oedipus is ‘fated’ to do. Now ‘*chrē*’ has a range of meanings, including one that is close to a pure future tense, often translated ‘is to be’,<sup>161</sup> which is also a standard meaning of the verb ‘*mellein*’.<sup>162</sup> In this sense fate simply represents a jumping up of the actual to the necessary. As A. F. Garvie writes on Aeschylus, *Persae* 908–17: ‘In his despair Xerxes makes no attempt to understand why everything has gone so wrong. It has happened, so it must have been fated to happen’. Hence the meaning of *Oedipus Rex* 791 might be simply ‘that I was to . . .’ rather than the modally weightier ‘that I was fated/obliged to . . .’. However, it is clear from Aristotle’s discussion of future contingency alone, not to mention many other passages, that for Greek (as indeed for modern) thought the idea of what *will* happen is often felt to be close to the idea of what *must* happen. That is especially so in epistemic contexts. If you know what *will* happen, it is natural to think that that can only be so because what *will* happen also *must* happen: for how else could you know? Someone who knows the future has, plausibly, tapped into a necessary process and extrapolated the outcome. Seriously entertaining the idea that the future might be metaphysically determinate, and even foreknown, but not necessary was largely an achievement of late antique and medieval thought.<sup>163</sup> So it would be reasonable for my objector to insist that the future tenses in the quoted passage, and the use of ‘*chrē*’, are at least not clearly distinguished from the modal ‘must’. There is a natural transition from the idea of what will be to the idea of what is fated to be.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> So e.g. Pucci 1992, 25; Manuwald on 791. Cf. lines 854, 995.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 200; Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 1602; [Euripides], *Rhesus* 752.

<sup>161</sup> So e.g. at Euripides, *Children of Heracles* 491; *Iphigeneia in Tauris* 1288; Aristophanes, *Thesmophoriazousae* 16. See LSJ s. v. II.

<sup>162</sup> So e.g. at Sophocles, *Ajax* 925; cf. *Philoctetes* 1083.

<sup>163</sup> See Gaskin 1994a; 1995, ch. 12 with Appendices 1 and 2; Schmitt 1997, 27–9.

<sup>164</sup> Cf. [Aeschylus], *Prometheus Vincetus* 485, 1067, with Griffith ad loc. Euripides, *Andromache* 1247, with Stevens ad loc.

My response to this historico-linguistic objection is that, even if Sophocles thinks that Oedipus, in some sense, *must* do what he does (these being the terms, according to the objection, in which Apollo issues the prophecy), he is nevertheless a fully free agent.<sup>165</sup> I here presuppose compatibilism about freedom, and I rely on the simple fact that Oedipus is described as acting like a free agent. In the story he makes choices, and is under no duress when he makes them; for a compatibilist about freedom that is good enough to ensure that the actions really are free, provided they also meet a rationality constraint. This is so regardless of whatever subterranean necessities (physical or theological) may be operative. At the surface level, the level of actions and their typical characterizations, of reasons for action and agent rationality, of presence or absence of duress, and so on—and it is on that surface where, according to the compatibilist, freedom exists—Oedipus does not have to do what he does. To the extent that we are inclined to say that he must do what he does, that simply reflects an *ex post facto* inference from the factual to the fated: he did it, so it ‘was to be’.<sup>166</sup> Vickers distinguishes between Oedipus’ actions during the play, and his critical actions beforehand, arguing that the former are free and the latter not (1973, 498–500); but I see no relevant distinction. The fact that Oedipus killed Laius and married Jocasta in ignorance of their relations to himself does not derogate from the freedom of those acts. Vickers suggests that ‘freedom means—at the very least—that I am able to act and control my actions with full knowledge of who I am’ (ibid., 499). But this sets much too high a standard for freedom. We never have that degree of knowledge: it cannot be the case that if, say, I unearth some old family documents which reveal that I have hitherto been in error about my paternity, I must judge that my actions to date have not been free.

Tragedies always involve contingency—in particular free action, and often sheer coincidence as well. Relatedly, as Bradley reminded us in one of his most memorable passages, events have a habit of turning out otherwise than intended.<sup>167</sup> True, the ingredients of catastrophe are generally all there from the beginning—the flawed characters, the latent deceits and falsehoods waiting to be exposed, the ambient hatreds, and so on. But *a priori* it is not a given that those ingredients will combine in just the right way for tragedy; things might just

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<sup>165</sup> Doubts about ascribing free will to fifth-century dramatic characters that are grounded in the so-called lexical method (so e.g. Vernant in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2001, vol. 1, ch. 3) are well disposed of by Halliwell 1990a, 34–42, and Flaig 1998, 33–4; see also Gaskin 2001. I shall return to the inadequacies of the lexical method in Part II.

<sup>166</sup> Cf. Hejduk 2013.

<sup>167</sup> Bradley 1991, 41–3; cf. Montrose 1996, 15.

as well proceed in the same old uneventful way. For every actual tragic event, there are many such events that could occur but do not, because the necessary conditions are not assembled at the right time, in the right place, or in the right order. How easily might Hamlet have lived to old age happily married to Ophelia, as George Eliot once mused (1979, 514). So I do not think we should agree with Stanley Cavell when he writes (2003, 112):

Of course if Othello had not met Iago, if Lear had not developed his plan of division, if Macbeth had not listened to his wife. . . . But could these contingencies have been prevented? If one is assured that they could have been, one is forgetting who these characters are. For if, for example, Othello hadn't met Iago he would have created another, his magnetism would have selected him, and the magic of his union would have inspired him. So a radical necessity haunts every story of tragedy.

On the contrary, we may reply, Othello's tragedy depends on a sequence of contingencies: Iago's high-wire act could at any moment have crashed to earth. The preconditions for tragedy—depending, as Cavell says, on character, and especially on the lack of mutual understanding between Othello and Desdemona<sup>168</sup>—were all in place, but it needed a particular and highly contingent combination of circumstances, including crucial free decisions on the part of the main agents, for tragedy to be activated.<sup>169</sup> So too with the plot of the *Oedipus Rex*.<sup>170</sup>

Euripides' Cassandra says that if the Greeks had stayed at home, Hector's virtues would not have shone forth (*Trojan Women* 395–7); just so, and he would also not have been tragic. Horst Steinmetz draws our attention to the bizarre array of coincidences that characterizes Lessing's *Emilia Galotti*, and suggests that the play could just as well have ended as a comedy; A. D. Nuttall remarks that *Romeo and Juliet* moves from comic to tragic form.<sup>171</sup> But it is true of all tragedies that in imaginable counterfactual scenarios catastrophe would have been averted: it is true of the *Antigone*, for instance, that if Creon had elected to release Antigone before burying Polyneices no one would have died; what if Edmund's final message in *King Lear* had not arrived too late?<sup>172</sup> Conversely, in plays of the 'catastrophe survived' genre, the aversion of disaster often depends on pure luck, of which Euripides made

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<sup>168</sup> See Leavis 1952, 145; Garner 1976, 244–50; Neely 1980, 228; Gaskin 2013a, 99–101.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Bradley 1959, 82; Wittgenstein 1984, 466.

<sup>170</sup> Cf. Poole 1987, 103; M. Nussbaum 1994, 64; Küpper 2014, 300.

<sup>171</sup> Steinmetz 1987, 106–10; Nuttall 2007b, 99–119. Cf. Lampert 1981a, 163–4; H. Nisbet 2013, 491–2.

<sup>172</sup> Nuttall 2007b, 307.

such good use in his recognition plays.<sup>173</sup> It is important to add here that it does *not* follow, as Steinmetz also claims, that *Emilia Galotti*'s reliance on coincidence in any way lessens the guilt of the principal agents or their responsibility for catastrophe. We are responsible for the errors we commit even when (as is invariably the case) other causal factors contribute to the ensuing of undesirable consequences. No one is causally isolated when he performs an action. So I think that Cavell is wrong to banish contingency from the tragedies of Othello, Lear, and Macbeth, but what is right in the quoted passage is the emphasis on the importance of character. We need to hold in balance the twin points that tragedy involves contingency, but that protagonists' fates play out their characters in ways that conform to the Aristotelian requirements of probability and necessity. Bradley saw the matter clearly: 'The dictum that, with Shakespeare, "character is destiny" is no doubt an exaggeration, and one that may mislead (for many of his tragic personages, if they had not met with peculiar circumstances, would have escaped a tragic end, and might even have lived fairly untroubled lives); but it is the exaggeration of a vital truth' (1991, 29–30).

Free action and the accidental are both species of contingency, but they need to be kept distinct. Aristotle fails properly to include, as a feature of tragedy, contingency in the sense of the accidental, and this omission, as I have just in effect implied, is a mistake on his part, since tragedy is replete with that kind of contingency. No doubt Aristotle suppresses mention of the accidental because he thinks that it would not square with his doctrine that events in a tragedy must follow upon one another according to principles of probability and necessity.<sup>174</sup> But what he should have done was hedge that doctrine, not ignore the very evident importance of the accidental in tragic plots. (Aristotle does allow contingency to feature 'outside the play', and in its initial conditions, but he excludes it from the tragic action itself.)<sup>175</sup> Free action, by contrast, conforms to the doctrine—at least according to anyone who thinks in a compatibilist way about freedom, as it is plausible that Aristotle did.<sup>176</sup> And the compatibilist is right to insist that our *central* cases of freedom are rational, predictable actions—actions that are performed for good and sufficient reasons—not mad, unpredictable ones. If serving God is the most rational thing to do, then his service is indeed perfect freedom, as the Collect has it, provided my decision is to enter into that service is not forced

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<sup>173</sup> See Bond on Euripides, *Heracles* 513f.

<sup>174</sup> Cf. Gellrich 1988, 104–25.

<sup>175</sup> See *Poetics* 1450b27–8, 1454b6–8, 1460a27–32; Barnwell 1982, 219–21; Heath 1991, 394–5.

<sup>176</sup> Everson 1990; *pace* Vernant in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2001, vol. 1, 59–61.

on me by others. Tragic plots revolve around rational, predictable, free actions. For tragedy ‘is deeply concerned with decision’:<sup>177</sup> it is striking that quotations and discussions of tragic works in antiquity tend to focus on the ethical dilemmas and aporias that they present,<sup>178</sup> and it would be hard to think of a single tragic work in the tradition that does not involve at least one structurally important decision somewhere in its plot. Even tragedies of inaction, such as (perhaps) some of Chekhov’s or Beckett’s plays, fall under this rubric: for a decision to do nothing is still a decision. A decision, such as Prometheus’, to stick to one’s resolve is still a decision.<sup>179</sup>

Free action is action that, like all contingency, ‘could have gone otherwise’, as we often put it. Aeschylus’ Agamemnon donned the strap that tied him to the yoke of necessity (218), but he did so freely. Aeschylus’ language at the crucial point in the work is focalized, reflecting Agamemnon’s own feelings of compulsion: he simply cannot bear the alternative to sacrificing his daughter, namely desertion of the fleet. But the words that express his dilemma (205–27) make clear that he has a real choice.<sup>180</sup> Pelasgus too, in the *Suppliants*, feels that he is acting under necessity (440, 478), but his decisions are clearly free. Again, both Agamemnon and Pelasgus are *described* as acting freely: it is not that Agamemnon *could not* desert the expedition; it is not that Pelasgus *could not* ignore the Danaids’ threat; it is just that these alternatives seem comparatively unattractive.<sup>181</sup> Similarly, in saying that Oedipus did what he did freely, I imply that he had a genuine choice in the matter, that he could have acted otherwise—at all relevant stages of the story, both before he received Apollo’s oracle and afterwards—than the way he did act.<sup>182</sup> W. H. Auden once remarked that ‘Greek tragedy is the tragedy of necessity: i.e., the feeling aroused in the spectator is “What a pity it had to be this way”’; Christian tragedy is the tragedy of possibility, “What a pity it was this way when it might have been otherwise”’;<sup>183</sup> but Auden’s motto for Christian tragedy also applies to Greek, and indeed all, tragedy. Of course, as Kierkegaard remarked (1987, vol. 1, 143), free action is not performed in a vacuum, but in a context of substantial constraints. But the

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<sup>177</sup> Sewell-Rutter 2007, 171. See also M. Nussbaum 1986; B. Williams 1993; Hall 1996, 296 (and 2012); Ridley 2003, 414–19; Rutherford 2012, 315–22; Pippin 2015.

<sup>178</sup> Most 2000, 27–8.

<sup>179</sup> Griffith 1983, 13.

<sup>180</sup> So N. Hammond 1973, 403–8; Fraenkel 1978, vol. 2, 99; Hutchinson 1985, 149. *Contra* Denniston and Page 1957, xxiii–xxv; Lloyd-Jones 1990, 289.

<sup>181</sup> Cf. Dodds 1973, 57; Lesky 1983, 15; Peradotto 2007, 233.

<sup>182</sup> On Philoctetes’ freedom, see Krewet 2015, esp. 132–4.

<sup>183</sup> Quoted by Jarrett-Kerr 1965, 368–9.

presence of such a context does not derogate from freedom: quite the reverse. Free action is essentially rational, as we have said,<sup>184</sup> and rational action is constituted as such by being situated in a context that gives it identity, that makes demands and supplies reasons. Action in a social and rational vacuum would not be free, but mad (or would not be action at all). A good illustration of this point is provided by Ellida's decision at the end of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea*. Ellida cannot resolve her impasse until she is permitted to decide in full freedom. But the freedom of her decision consists principally in the absence of duress from her husband: it does not require—and could indeed not be made in—a context devoid of operative causes and reasons. The freedom of the tragic hero or heroine is not constituted merely by the capacity to take a reflective attitude, perhaps as envisaged by the early Wittgenstein, to his or her situation;<sup>185</sup> it is constituted by an ability to make a difference to the world, given genuine alternatives.<sup>186</sup> Nothing in the compatibilist story about freedom requires us to deny this evident truth.

There is an important logical point that needs to be mentioned here. Someone might object to my argument as follows: at any given moment, the past in respect of that moment is unalterable, so a past oracle and its content are fixed at that moment; if in addition we assume that Apollo's oracle, say, made an *infallible* prediction concerning Oedipus' future actions, then, when the time comes for him to act, how can Oedipus do *other* than what he does? The necessity of the past, along with the necessity of the connection between prediction and predicted outcome, import the necessity of that predicted outcome, by dint of a familiar transfer-of-necessity principle, common to all modal systems: if the antecedent of an implication is necessary, and the implication is itself necessary, then the consequent is necessary, too. (The transfer principle was denied by Luis de Molina, founder of the important doctrine of middle knowledge; but few have followed him in this.)<sup>187</sup> In order to escape from this bind, it looks as though we must either tolerate backwards causation, or give up the infallibility of the oracle, or both. That is, it seems that we must say either that Oedipus later has the power to bring it about that Apollo did not make the earlier prediction, or that he has the power to bring it about that the earlier prediction, though fixed, was in error, or both. The first option involves tampering with the necessity of the past, something

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<sup>184</sup> For an excellent discussion of this point, see Wolf 1993.

<sup>185</sup> So Holbrook 2015, 15–27. On Wittgenstein, see e.g. Appelqvist 2013a, 47; Schönbaumsfeld 2013, 66–7.

<sup>186</sup> Pace Fitch and McElduff 2008, 177.

<sup>187</sup> See Gaskin 1994b, 570; Hasker 2011, 50.

that most thinkers have been unwilling to do ever since the tragedian Agathon, as Aristotle reports him, declared that the one thing even god cannot do is to reverse what has happened (*NE* 1139b9–11).<sup>188</sup> What about the second option? In the context of medieval Christian debates on these matters, thinkers were understandably reluctant to countenance the idea of a *deus fallens*, of a god who makes predictions that turn out to be false.<sup>189</sup> Whether pagan gods can make false predictions is a moot point. Plato preserves a beautiful fragment of Aeschylus in which Thetis accuses Apollo of falsely prophesying long life for her future son Achilles.<sup>190</sup> But, as Robert Parker points out, it may be that ‘Thetis had misunderstood the god’s riddling words (in which, certainly, she deserves all our sympathy)’ (1999, 21). Thetis construed his words in one way, and understood in that way they turned out to be false, but there was an alternative interpretation, perhaps, which rendered them true. As Chaucer’s *Criseyde* puts it,

For goddes speken in amphibologies,  
And for o soth they tellen twenty lyes.<sup>191</sup>

That is certainly one way of saving Apollo’s credibility in the face of Thetis’ accusation: his words were ambiguous. But there is another way.

The Christian God, being omniscient, must be presumed to know the meaning of his own predictions. But in a pagan context the parallel assumption that divine oracles know the meaning of their own predictions generates a crucial subtlety that eases the logical bind I mentioned in the last paragraph. For although pagan oracles know in *general* terms what their predictions mean, they do not always know their *precise* meaning; and, by contrast with the Christian God, pagan oracles often do not know *in detail* how their predictions will be realized. Parker again notes that ‘there are strict limits to what is actually revealed even through the especially authoritative medium of prophecy. You will kill your father and marry your mother, Oedipus is warned; neither he nor we learn why’ (1999, 14). Nor—and this is the point here—do we learn *how*. Indeed it is usual with ancient oracles that the manner and circumstances of their fulfilment are left unstated. For one thing, it will normally be indeterminate *when* the oracle is to be realized:<sup>192</sup> so Darius, in Aeschylus’ *Persae*, pins his hopes on the possibility that the prophesied disaster may lie in the distant future (739–41). More importantly in the present context, oracular predictions may leave open the possibility

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<sup>188</sup> On some of the issues here, see Zagzebski 1991; Gaskin 1994a and 1998a; Hasker 2011.

<sup>189</sup> See Gaskin 1997.

<sup>190</sup> Aeschylus fr. 350 = Plato, *Republic* 383a7–b9.

<sup>191</sup> Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* IV, 1406–7; cf. Spearing at Chaucer 1995, 89.

<sup>192</sup> Cf. Zeitlin 1982, 19; Garvie 2009, 293.

of a *metaphorical* implementation.<sup>193</sup> No doubt it is fixed that Oedipus will in *some* sense kill his father and sleep with his mother, but in *what* sense will he do these things? ‘Father’ and ‘mother’ often carry the metaphorical meaning of ‘homeland’;<sup>194</sup> so killing one’s father and sleeping with one’s mother *might* in the event amount to no more than (say) plunging a sword or spear into the earth of one’s native land and then lying down to rest on one’s native soil.<sup>195</sup> Rutherford remarks, in line with Parker’s suggestion above about Aeschylus’ Thetis: ‘Those who have heard the god’s pronouncement often misunderstand it, misremember it, or hope that it will remain unfulfilled. But in tragedy oracular predictions are always fulfilled’.<sup>196</sup> True, but there is another possibility, which is that the oracle is *indeterminate in meaning*, so that although tragic agents know, or should know, that oracular predictions are always fulfilled, they often do not know, and sometimes cannot know—because it cannot *be* known; it is simply not yet fixed—in what *sense* the oracle will be fulfilled. It is not merely that the recipients cannot imagine how the oracle will be fulfilled:<sup>197</sup> there may be literally nothing there, as yet, to imagine. Until it is fulfilled, it may just be indeterminate what the meaning of the prediction *was*. This indeterminacy is more radical than the standard indeterminacy of the Croesus kind of oracle.<sup>198</sup>

We can go further. Oedipus *could* have decided to perform the actions I have mentioned precisely *in order* to defuse the oracle, by making it come true harmlessly. When the harpy Celaeno predicts to Virgil’s Aeneas and his men that they will end up devouring the very tables in their hunger, it is fixed, we might say, that they *will* indeed eat their tables, in some sense, but not fixed in *what* sense they will do so. And in fact the prediction is fulfilled in the most banal way, when Ascanius interprets the bannocks they eat on reaching Italy as their ‘tables’.<sup>199</sup> Ascanius thereby lays the curse to rest: it would be absurd for Aeneas (or the reader) to worry that the Trojans might *still*, even after eating their tables metaphorically, have to consume them in a literal sense, on the grounds that that was what Celaeno *meant*.

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<sup>193</sup> See e.g. Euripides, *Medea* 679, with Mastronarde ad loc.

<sup>194</sup> See e.g. Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 584–5, with Hutchinson ad loc.; note also the passage of Artemidorus cited by M. Nussbaum 1994, 53–4.

<sup>195</sup> Recall the stories of Hippas (Herodotus VI, 107–8) and Brutus (Livy I, 56, 10–12), the latter retold in Heywood’s *The Rape of Lucrece*; Deucalion and Pyrrha (Ovid, *Met.* I, 313–45); cf. T. Gould 1965, 605; Burkert 1991, 8; Flaig 1998, 25–6; Vernant in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2001, vol. 1, 97–8; Morgan 2015, 136–7.

<sup>196</sup> Rutherford 2012, 349; cf. Budelmann 2000, 109; Garvie 2009, 101.

<sup>197</sup> Cf. Schein on Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 610–13; Budelmann 2000, 123–4.

<sup>198</sup> See Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1407a39; Garvie on Aeschylus, *Persae* 864–7.

<sup>199</sup> See *Aeneid* III, 255–7; VII, 112–19; XII, 834–40; T. Gould 1965, 606; Panoussi 2010, 59; Reed 2010, 68–9.

Celaeno did not mean anything so definite: the metaphorical realization of the prediction is quite sufficient to satisfy the metaphysical demands of the poem and its oracles. Admittedly Celaeno did mean to predict something *unpleasant* for Aeneas and his men, and in that she turns out to be wrong; but that is a mere matter of detail, and classical—by contrast with Christian—theology has no difficulty with it. So we might say that the classical position is that a certain amount of anti-realism about past meaning is allowed: that is, while in *general* terms the content of an oracle is fixed at the time of its pronouncement, its *precise* meaning remains to be determined by subsequent events and by the relevant agent(s). (There is all the difference in the world between literally and metaphorically eating tables: that *is* matter of meaning.) Hence, having received the Delphic oracle, it remained open to Oedipus to undertake not to kill his father and marry his mother in the literal sense; he might have avoided these actions, but if he had done so then one day it would no doubt have become clear to him that there was a metaphorical sense in which he had fulfilled the prediction, perhaps quite harmlessly. And, as I have said, he might have deliberately undertaken to realize the prediction innocuously, in order to defuse it. That deflecting manoeuvre, had Oedipus engaged in it, might to be sure have been unsuccessful; then again, it might have worked.

Suppose, however, that my objector refuses all this, and insists on both the necessity of the past and (implausibly, I suggest) the determinate meaning of Apollo's oracle; in that case, and *modulo* those assumptions, the compatibilist about freedom must agree that, in a metaphysical sense, Oedipus' foretold actions are necessary. But then the compatibilist's whole point is that such *underlying* necessities, whether physical, theological, or (as we have just been exploring) temporal, are irrelevant to *real* freedom. Real freedom is social or political: it involves having the power to do as one chooses, provided that one's choice meets a rationality constraint, and having the power to act otherwise than one does in the sense that one is subject to no duress from any agent, animate or inanimate, forcing one to do what one chooses to do. Hence, even if we think that there is a sense in which Oedipus must do what he does—on the grounds that Sophocles, like Aristotle, thinks that what *will* happen *must* happen, and because it is true in advance, and Apollo knows, that Oedipus will (literally) kill his father and marry his mother (or both)—these facts still do not derogate from Oedipus' (real) freedom. If Oedipus must do what he does in a metaphysical sense, then that, as we have said, is no more than the reflection of an *ex post facto* inference from the factual to the necessary. It matters, for freedom, how this necessity comes about: if it comes about merely

because that is what Oedipus will choose to do, there is no conflict with freedom, because his actions may still be performed freely in the socio-political sense. The future will be that particular way—and so must be that way, if we accept the modal inference—*because* Oedipus will freely perform such and such actions. By contrast, he would not be free if he acted under duress. But acting within the causal order—this was one of Hume’s great insights—does not as such put agents under duress: causes do not *enforce* their effects; they merely precede them in a lawlike manner. Force, duress, compulsion, constraint, to the extent that these things deprive one of freedom, necessarily involve human or non-human *agency*; they are not, just as such, what causes do to effects.

The same goes for predictions: predictions do not *enforce* the predicted outcomes. Hence, even if we think that Oedipus acts under a kind of temporal necessity, because he cannot change the past and Apollo’s prediction is assumed to be both infallible and determinate in meaning, so that by dint of the transfer of necessity principle Oedipus must now do what he was predicted to do, still he is free in the genuine sense of the word, and it was only because Apollo foresaw what Oedipus would freely (in the genuine sense) do that he was able to make the prediction in the first place.<sup>200</sup> Apollo does not exercise any kind of duress on Oedipus; he does not actively *bring about* Oedipus’ fall. As numerous commentators have observed, he merely *foretells* it.<sup>201</sup> However, the view that Apollo not only foresees but also determines Oedipus’ actions and fate persists;<sup>202</sup> it is implied in the common statement that Oedipus is the ‘plaything’ of the gods.<sup>203</sup> Klaus Nickau writes: ‘Der Gott Apollon stellt die Aufgabe, der Mensch Ödipus löst sie’ (‘The god Apollo sets the problem, the man Oedipus solves it’: 1994, 10). It is true that in the Aeschylean and Euripidean versions of the Laius story, Apollo *does* set a task or problem, since there his prophecy is conditional, so that Laius has to decide whether to refrain from having a son, or proceed and take the consequences.<sup>204</sup> But in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* Apollo does not figure in that way. And in any case, as we

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<sup>200</sup> Cf. Garvie 2016, 48.

<sup>201</sup> Whitman 1951, 140–1; Knox 1960, 22; 1998, 12–16, 33–41; Kitto 1961, 395; Vickers 1973, 497; Kirkwood 1994, 73, 76, 173; Flaig 1998, 27–8; Lefèvre 2001, 146; Griffith 2005a, 345; Greiner 2012, 43, 51.

<sup>202</sup> T. Gould 1965 and 1966; Lloyd-Jones 1983, 217–18 n. 112; Nicolai 1992, 58–67; Peradotto 1992, 8; Nuttall 2007b, 286, 289; Liapis 2012b, 95; Hall 2012, 304, 309; Rose 2012, 256–7, 266. Cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 159–60, 178, 202.

<sup>203</sup> See e.g. Ahrens Dorf 2009, 42.

<sup>204</sup> Aeschylus, *Seven Against Thebes* 750–1, 801–2; Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 17–20; cf. M. West 1999, 39–40. Kovacs thinks (2009, 366) that the oracle is conditional in Sophocles too.

have said, it is plausible that the meaning of Apollo's oracle is not so fixed that Oedipus cannot fulfil it harmlessly.

## 8 *Operatur deus in unoquoque secundum eius proprietatem*

I have argued that Oedipus is free in his crucial actions. In fact, even if Sophocles had represented Apollo as *determining* the acts of parricide and incest—even if you think that that is how Sophocles *does* represent things—that would *still* not detract from Oedipus' freedom. And the same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for other tragic heroes. This is so because of a fundamental principle governing divine intervention in traditional literature, namely that *operatur deus in unoquoque secundum eius proprietatem*: the god acts in each person according to that person's character.<sup>205</sup> Labels such as 'overdetermination' (Dodds), or 'the "double determination" of cause' (Willink), or 'the unity of two aspects' (Lesky),<sup>206</sup> do not accurately register the true nature of the explanatory connection between divine prompting and human response. These accounts do not reflect the fact that there is an explanatory *asymmetry* between human and divine planes. The explanatory relation runs from former to latter, and not from latter to former: that is, it is the human plane that explains the divine, and not vice versa. Lesky criticizes Dodds on the basis that 'overdetermination' fails to capture the mutual connectedness of divine and human planes (1961, 29–30, 44), but it seems to me that he in turn misses the fact that this mutual connectedness is asymmetric—that the human plane enjoys explanatory priority, so that in 'the unity of the two aspects' the two aspects do not contribute equally or independently. This asymmetry is also missed by Jean-Pierre Vernant in his discussion of the Heraclitean dictum '*ēthos anthrōpōi daimōn*'.<sup>207</sup> This aphorism is an identity statement, and identity statements can be read in two different directions, with correspondingly different emphases. Is Heraclitus saying 'You might have thought that a human being's character, *ēthos anthrōpōi*, was something natural, but actually it is *daimōn*, which is (as we know) supernatural'? Or is he saying, contrariwise, 'You might have thought that *daimōn* was something supernatural, but actually it is just a human being's character, which is (as we know) natural'? In other words, is he reducing the natural to the supernatural or vice versa? The former option seems to me unlikely, since it is the natural that

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<sup>205</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia q. 83 a1 (1894, vol. 1, 634); Schmitt 1982, 22–3; 1988a, 164–6; 1990, 91–9; Lefèvre 2015, 421–44.

<sup>206</sup> Dodds 1951, 7, 16; Willink on Euripides, *Orestes* 974–5; Lesky 1961, 40–1, 1983. Cf. Segal 1981, 200; Halliwell 1990b; Easterling 1993a, 15; Mastronarde on Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 621.

<sup>207</sup> Heraclitus DK B119; Vernant in Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 2001, vol. 1, 21–40, 66–70. Cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 177.

is given, the onus being on the supernatural to earn its metaphysical keep; but, whichever way Heraclitus himself intended his aphorism, it is only when it is construed in the latter way that it speaks truly about the role of the supernatural in classical and classicizing tragic literature. For in this genre it is the natural that is in the driving seat, the supernatural that tags along behind.

Lesky discusses (1961, 43–4) the Pandaros episode in Homer’s *Iliad* (IV, 73–148), in which Athene prompts Pandaros to break the truce that has been established between Trojans and Greeks. Why does Athene approach Pandaros in particular? She does so because he has the right combination of ambition, bravery, greed, and folly to give ear to temptation.<sup>208</sup> As we learn later, Pandaros is keen to prove himself as an archer, having ignored his father’s advice to take chariot and horses to Troy (V, 180–216). Similarly, Virgil’s Allecto appears to Turnus in order to rouse him to violence against the Trojan interlopers precisely because he is the kind of man who will listen to her.<sup>209</sup> He initially spurns her approaches, then knuckles under; we have a representation of Turnus’ inherent violence overcoming temporary resistance, as also in Seneca’s *Thyestes* when Tantalus succumbs to the Fury.<sup>210</sup> When, in the same play, Atreus devises his revenge he repeats the word ‘rapior’ (261–2)—‘I am snatched away, borne along’—but ‘his vagueness about the force that is possessing him is appropriate, since it ultimately proceeds from within him’.<sup>211</sup> Downing’s comment on Lord Monchensey in T. S. Eliot’s *The Family Reunion* (1969, 346)—

We most of us seem to live according to circumstance,  
But with people like him, there’s something inside them  
That accounts for what happens to them—

encapsulates the fate of almost all tragic heroes and heroines. Aristotle has often been criticized for marginalizing the role of the supernatural in his discussion of tragedy in the *Poetics*, but in one good sense he was right: it is the natural that does all the work.<sup>212</sup> Stephen Halliwell’s view is that Aristotle omits the gods because their involvement in tragedy is, from a human point of view, fortuitous (governed by *tuchē*), so that mentioning them would upset

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<sup>208</sup> Schmitt 1982, 21–2; 1988a, 164–6; 1990, 82–4; 1997, 15, 31.

<sup>209</sup> See Heinze 1957, 306; R. D. Williams 1990, 31; Gaskin 1992, 304; Otis 1995, 323–5.

<sup>210</sup> See Tarrant 1985, 85.

<sup>211</sup> Tarrant on Seneca, *Thyestes* 261; cf. Boyle ad loc.; Miola 1992, 25; Schiesaro 2009, 225–6; Lefèvre 2015, 340–1, 393–400.

<sup>212</sup> See e.g. *Poetics* 1454a37–b6; cf. Gillett and Hankey 2005, 274; Görner 2015, 167. *Pace* Halliwell 1995, 90; Hall 1996, 296.

his emphasis on probability and necessity in tragedy.<sup>213</sup> On my approach, he incurs praise rather than blame: Aristotle omits the gods because he thinks that the supernatural is, in the deep structure of tragedy, irrelevant, and he is right about that. ‘Supernatural’ causation is, *au fond*, natural. As Darius puts it in Aeschylus’ *Persae*, ‘when a man is in a hurry himself, the god will lend him a hand’ (742; tr. Sommerstein): that captures the *ex post facto* status of divine motivation of human action.<sup>214</sup> Likewise, too, with the positive version of the same idea: God helps those who help themselves.<sup>215</sup> In the messenger speech of the *Persae*, and in the words of its main agents, the idea of divine causation is repeatedly invoked,<sup>216</sup> but the narrated and portrayed events are nevertheless given purely naturalistic explanations, and it is made clear that the calamities of Salamis and Psyttaleia result from Xerxes’ own culpable misjudgements.<sup>217</sup>

The point of divine intervention in traditional literature is not to undermine the autonomy and sufficiency of human motivation but to represent it in a particular way—in fact to enlarge and dignify it,<sup>218</sup> rather in the manner of the sublime moment in Bellini’s *Norma* when the heroine senses the presence of the druid god Irminsul (II, 7):

A mirare il trionfo de’ figli  
 ecco il Dio sopra un raggio di sol,  
 s’un raggio di sol.

(‘See the god marvelling at his sons’ triumph, upon a ray of sunshine’: 2013, 160.) But Irminsul takes no part in the action, which is motivated entirely naturalistically. What the divine says to the mortal, the mortal has already said, or is about to say, to itself. From Marlowe to Calderón to Goethe to Berlioz to Gounod to Busoni to Mann the devil appears to Faust because he is primed, or has even expressly abjured heaven and adjured hell, as in Marlowe’s version. It is true that Marlowe’s Mephostophilis arrogates the initiative to himself (B-text: V, 2, 96–9):

’Twas I that, when thou wert i’ the way to heaven,  
 Damned up thy passage. When thou took’st the book  
 To view the Scriptures, then I turned the leaves

<sup>213</sup> Halliwell 2006, 136–7; 2012, 215.

<sup>214</sup> See Garvie ad loc.; 2009, 288; Peradotto 2007, 229–31.

<sup>215</sup> See Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Tauris* 910–11, with L. Parker ad loc.

<sup>216</sup> Messenger: 353–4, 362, 373, 454–5, 495–9, 502–3, 513–14; Atossa: 472–3, 724; Darius: 725; Xerxes: 941–3, 909–16; Chorus: 515–16, 904–6, 1005–7.

<sup>217</sup> Garvie 2009, 185–6, 192, 205, 210, 215–16, 223, 238–9, 272–3, 287–8; Bowen on *Suppliants* 511.

<sup>218</sup> See here de Mourgues 1967, 116; Kirkwood 1994, 80.

And led thine eye.

Mark Burnett thinks that these lines communicate the author's view that Faustus 'is damned all along: he has no freedom of choice' (2010, 172). But they are part of Mephistophilis' characterization, and what they convey is just bravado: Faustus is from first to last responsible and free, and the contest between the good and bad angels merely gives external expression to a debate that is going on in Faustus's soul.<sup>219</sup> Like Faustus, Milton's Eve is ready to listen to Satan's temptations: there is a sense in which she has already fallen.<sup>220</sup>

The psychologizing of Aphrodite's role in Euripides' *Hippolytus* is rendered easy by the fact that she speaks the prologue and then takes no further part in the drama: she seems to sink into the action as a psychic force,<sup>221</sup> which is the way that the Nurse characterizes her (443–50).<sup>222</sup> (Similar remarks apply to the roles of Cupid and Megaera in *The Tragedy of Tancred and Gismund* by Robert Wilmot and others.) In this respect she contrasts with Dionysus in the *Bacchae*, who speaks a similar prologue to Aphrodite's in the *Hippolytus*, but then does take part in the play, in human form.<sup>223</sup> But this difference, though dramatically important, is from our point of view theoretically superficial: it does not signal a deep difference in the extent to which the supernatural can be naturalized. As Dodds remarks in his commentary on the *Bacchae*: 'In the maddening of Pentheus, as in the maddening of Heracles . . . , the poet shows us the supernatural attacking the victim's personality at its weakest point—working upon and through nature, not against it. The god wins because he has an ally in the enemy's camp: the persecutor is betrayed by what he would persecute—the Dionysiac longing in himself'.<sup>224</sup> In the *Helen*, the contest between Hera and Aphrodite has to be resolved on the day of action, but the prophetess Theonoe makes clear that the decision between them is a matter of whether *she* decides to tell Theoclymenos of Menelaus' presence in Egypt, so that the divine level is in effect anthropomorphized.<sup>225</sup> Athene drives Sophocles' Ajax mad, but the madness is readily naturalizable when we recall that it supervened on Ajax' decision, which he never later regrets, to launch a treacherous attack on the Greek leaders. Ajax' madness emerges organically from his character and dispositions, in the context of the slight he has received and his impulse to avenge it: 'the seeds of madness were already in him,

<sup>219</sup> Cf. Rozett 1984, ch. 7; Belsey 1985, 43–4; Cooper 2010, 86.

<sup>220</sup> Newlyn 1993, 75–80, 155–6.

<sup>221</sup> Gaskin 2013a, 108. Cf. Fitch 1987, 32, on Seneca's *Thyestes* and *Hercules Furens*.

<sup>222</sup> See Barrett ad loc., and on 542–4.

<sup>223</sup> See Dodds 1960, 62.

<sup>224</sup> Dodds 1960, 172; cf. his note on *Bacchae* 360–3; L. Parker 2007, 252–3.

<sup>225</sup> Pace Allan on 887–91, 1017.

evidenced by an abnormal megalomaniac pride'.<sup>226</sup> As Gisbert Ter-Nedden notes (2007, 345–6), Athene's apparent inducing of Ajax' madness is just a dramatic device to represent his *Verblendung*, which Athene does *not* induce, but rather reveals. Athene remarks to Odysseus: 'Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the power of the gods? What man was found to be more farsighted than this one, or better at doing what the occasion required?' (118–20; tr. Lloyd-Jones). The play—and indeed the tradition more generally—show these assessments of Ajax' character to be wrong,<sup>227</sup> which suggests a debunking reading of the 'power of the gods' too. What we really see in the *Ajax* is not the power of the gods, but the power of human nature: this is demonstrated in spectacular fashion when Athene fails in her attempts to make Odysseus triumph over Ajax and Ajax sympathize with Odysseus (79, 111).

Before his single combat with Paris, Homer's Menelaus prays to Zeus for aid, and he asks the god to 'subdue him beneath my hands' (*Iliad* III, 352). If Menelaus had killed Paris, he would have thanked Zeus for answering his prayer, but would have taken credit for victory no whit the less.<sup>228</sup> As Garvie remarks concerning the divine aid to the Athenians in Aeschylus' *Persae* (342), the audience would not feel that this help detracted from their achievement: 'they would remember the *Iliad*, in which divine support did not normally diminish the glory which a hero earned by his exploits; if anything, it enhanced it by showing that he was heroic enough to deserve that support'.<sup>229</sup> Conversely, when humans blame gods for their actions, they do not think that this lessens their own responsibility, as we learn from the case of Agamemnon's apology in *Iliad* XIX.<sup>230</sup> Some commentators take Agamemnon's words at face value,<sup>231</sup> but the sense at 137–8, filling out the subtext, is 'But since I was blinded by *atē* and Zeus robbed me of my wits <I am therefore to blame, and so> I wish to make amends and to give abundant recompense'. (Earlier—XIX, 86–90—Agamemnon had apparently denied responsibility and placed it on the gods: but there he is fudging the issue and trying to save face.)<sup>232</sup> And, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the fact that in sacrificing his daughter he is

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<sup>226</sup> Winnington-Ingram 1980, 41. Cf. *ibid.*, 27; Segal 1981, 128–9; Cairns 1993, 230; Finglass 2011, 313–14.

<sup>227</sup> Scodel 2005, 237–8.

<sup>228</sup> Cf. Mastronarde on Euripides, *Medea* 528, 1013–14.

<sup>229</sup> Garvie 2009, 178. Cf. Dover on Thucydides VI, 17, 1.

<sup>230</sup> See Adkins 1960, 51–2; Lesky 1961, 40–2; Willcock 1976, 127; Lloyd-Jones 1983, 23; Schmitt 1990, 85–9, 95; Redfield 1994, 97; Gaskin 2001, 155; Cairns 2016, 71–3 with n. 42; Dawe on Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1329; Willink on Euripides, *Orestes* 3.

<sup>231</sup> So e.g. Dodds 1951, 3; Fraenkel 1978, vol. 2, 374.

<sup>232</sup> Taplin 1990, 75–6.

carrying out the will of Zeus does not absolve Agamemnon from responsibility.<sup>233</sup> Ancient defendants were indeed ill-advised to plead divine instigation of their actions, for any such supernatural intervention would naturally be construed as a sign of voluntariness and so of guilt.<sup>234</sup> A similar point applies to apparent intrusions on the agent's autonomy that might otherwise be regarded as diminishing responsibility: if another mortal makes me commit a crime, I may be able to plead duress in extenuation of the offence;<sup>235</sup> but if a god 'makes' me do it, that renders me all the more responsible for it. The chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* remarks that Cassandra goes to her death like a beast approaching the altar 'driven by a god' (1297–8), that is to say, voluntarily. For it was important in sacrifices that the beast should not have to be forced—that is, not forced *by the priests*. If it is forced 'by a god', then it is not forced at all.<sup>236</sup> Dodds suggested that, whereas for Plato's priest, speaking on behalf of Lachesis in the Myth of Er, 'the responsibility is the chooser's; the god is exempt from responsibility (*theos anaitios*)' (*Republic* 617e4–5), Aeschylus might have preferred 'the responsibility is the chooser's; the god is responsible for everything (*theos panaitios*)' (1973, 56–7). But the two formulations are equivalent.

In Matthew Arnold's 'Sohrab and Rustum', which inverts the motif of the son slaying the father, Sohrab blames fate for his death (708–15). But Sohrab's death is quite clearly the outcome of human decisions and human mistakes. Its fatefulness does not undermine that human causality, but is a way of representing it, of celebrating it, of coming to terms with it. Even in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the fairies' interventions in the human action might seem essential to the resolution of the love plot, Shakespeare implies a naturalistic construal of events. 'The spell is never taken off Demetrius' eyes; without its lasting effect the love-tangle could not be resolved', comments Harold Brooks (on III, 2, 452). Well, but recall Helena's words (I, 1, 242–3):

For ere Demetrius looked on Hermia's eyne,  
He hailed down oaths that he was only mine.

Perhaps Oberon's lasting spell on Demetrius can be regarded naturalistically as the *removal* of an obsession for Hermia that had artificially interfered with his true love for Helena.<sup>237</sup> In that case, though in a relatively superficial sense 'in the *Dream*, the mortals are unaware how

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<sup>233</sup> Lloyd-Jones 1990, 289–90.

<sup>234</sup> See Flaig 1998, 36–7.

<sup>235</sup> Dover 1987, 136–8.

<sup>236</sup> See Fraenkel ad loc.; J. Gregory 1997, 97.

<sup>237</sup> See also I, 1, 105–12; III, 2, 171; IV, 1, 170–5; Nuttall 2007b, 132.

far they are puppets of the gods, and they never realize how their own sight has been tampered with',<sup>238</sup> at a deeper level we have human autonomy. Sophocles' Oedipus says 'These things were Apollo', but he adds 'None but I struck myself' (1329–32).<sup>239</sup> (Creon in the *Antigone* expresses himself similarly.)<sup>240</sup> Oedipus is not making a distinction between those events for which Apollo was responsible, and a distinct set of events for which he was responsible.<sup>241</sup> He takes responsibility for everything: in invoking Apollo, Oedipus elevates, without disavowing, his own part in his demise. There was nothing *untypically* free about Oedipus' self-blinding: the freedom that he exercised when he performed that desperate act was one that had attached to all his actions. Again, when Oedipus says (at 1382–3) that the gods have disclosed his guilt, he immediately adds (1384–5) that he has done so himself.

It is true that, once gods are on the scene, storytellers can represent them as full and independent agents, doing things that have no immediate or straightforward allegorical reduct:<sup>242</sup> an artist may even take a secular tale and inject a pantheon into it, as Wagner (borrowing from Norse legend) did with the *Nibelungenlied*. Above we contrasted Euripides' Aphrodite and his Dionysus, after they have spoken their prologues: the former takes no part in the main action of the *Hippolytus*, whereas the latter plays a decisive role in the main action of the *Bacchae*. Or consider the appearance of the Furies in the *Eumenides*. They first appear to the mad Orestes at the end of the *Choephoroi*, but not to the chorus, and in that manifestation they can be readily and immediately psychologized; but they then appear to the Pythia at the beginning of the *Eumenides*, so must have objective reality, and in the third part of the trilogy they emerge as autonomous agents, and continue to be such *after* Orestes has recovered sanity and been purified of blood-guilt and acquitted by the Areopagite court.<sup>243</sup> Similarly, although the Furies in Seneca's *Agamemnon* (359–64) and *Medea* (958–65) have no objective reality, a Fury appears as a stage figure in the prologue to the *Thyestes*.<sup>244</sup> In Sophocles' *Ajax* Athene's role in driving Ajax mad can be straightforwardly psychologized, as we have said, but in her exchanges with Odysseus and Ajax she figures as an independent agent, no matter how we settle the controversial question of the extent of her visibility to

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<sup>238</sup> Cooper 2010, 218–19.

<sup>239</sup> Cf. Budelmann 2000, 171–5; Lurje 2004, 244–9.

<sup>240</sup> *Antigone* 1272–4 with 1317–20. See Linforth 1961, 244, 257.

<sup>241</sup> Pace Dawe on *Oedipus Rex* 1329.

<sup>242</sup> Cf. A. Brown 1983, 32; R. Parker 1999, 11–14.

<sup>243</sup> See A. Brown 1983, 13–27; Garvie 1986, 316–18; Sommerstein on *Eumenides* 46–59.

<sup>244</sup> See Tarrant on *Agamemnon* 759ff.

characters and audience.<sup>245</sup> Again, as Dodds implied in a passage cited above, the role of Euripides' Iris and Lyssa in driving Heracles mad can be psychologized in an obvious way: the strain of Heracles' labours, and particularly of the last one, the harrowing of hell, has turned his wits, so that he has become a serial murderer, and thinks of the killing of his own children as his thirteenth labour; Heracles is a man of violence who needs violent tasks to occupy him;<sup>246</sup> against some critics,<sup>247</sup> I believe that Wilamowitz was right to discern signs of incipient madness in Heracles before Iris and Lyssa enter.<sup>248</sup> But Hera's two lackeys are hardly on stage before they quarrel, since Lyssa, who is the apotheosis of madness, paradoxically does not want to madden Heracles. So Iris and Lyssa, though to a large extent psychologizable, are *also* put on stage by the playwright as independent agents. It follows that we need to adopt a split-level approach to naturalizing the divine in traditional literature: some uses of the supernatural are immediately psychologizable; others are not. But it makes sense to treat the former as *primary*, or *basic*, and the latter as *secondary*, or *derived*, deployments of the supernatural. In the first instance, we might say, the divine in traditional literature does no more than body forth the human in a way that is immediately reducible to human psychology. But once divine agents on the scene, they can be given a life of their own, and can interact with mortal agents in a way which has no *immediate* allegorical reduct, only a *mediate* one.

Again, once divine agents are on the scene, the whole question of their relation to mortal affairs can be raised. Thus Euripides sometimes permits his characters to discuss explicitly the role of the gods and whether it undermines human freedom: in the *Heracles*, Theseus and Heracles debate this matter at length; Heracles' famously rationalistic response to Theseus' naïve belief in the tales of the poets stands in contradiction with his own sense of himself as a victim of Hera.<sup>249</sup> In the *Orestes*, Helen seeks to excuse herself as the victim of a 'god-sent madness' (79), and in the *Trojan Women*, the question whether Helen acted freely in deserting Menelaus or was driven by Aphrodite becomes part of the central debate between her and Hecuba, so that here again Euripides is allowing himself to play with the issue of the

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<sup>245</sup> See on this Buxton 1980, 22; Goldhill 1986a, 183; 2012, 41; Heath 1987, 165–6; Pucci 1994, 18–22; Finglass 2011, 137–8.

<sup>246</sup> See *Heracles* 1229, 1279, with Bond's notes ad locc.; Kamerbeek 1966; Wilamowitz 1984, vol. 2, 128; Girard 2010, 65–8; Fitch 1987, 32 (on Seneca's Hercules).

<sup>247</sup> See e.g. J. Gregory 1977, 264–8.

<sup>248</sup> See n. 148 above, and Wilamowitz's notes on *Heracles* 566, 569. Cf. Bond on 562–82; Dodds 1973, 83.

<sup>249</sup> See Wilson 2004, 77–80; Pucci 2016, 84.

connection between divine intervention and human freedom.<sup>250</sup> In the *Aeneid*, Nisus raises the same question: ‘Are the gods responsible for the ardour that I feel, or do we make gods of our desires?’ (IX, 184–5). The answer is the latter, but once the gods physically interfere as agents in the action more thoughtful characters will inevitably pose Nisus’ question. Even so, as I have suggested, the relative independence of divine agents, if that literary gambit is present, though it may block an *immediate* psychologizing move, does not derogate from the *fundamental* legitimacy of the naturalistic strategy, seeing that the relative independence of the divine is a derived status. And poets can work at both primary and secondary levels, as we have seen. Virgil’s Allecto has an easy time of it turning Amata against Aeneas, but she encounters resistance when she visits Turnus, even though she has been careful to present a persuasive appearance by disguising herself as a priestess (VII, 435–44). But the fact that Turnus, unlike Amata, initially rebuffs Allecto no more detracts from Allecto’s essentially allegorical status than the fact that Palinurus, Aeneas’ helmsman, initially resists Sleep (also in disguise) detracts from the latter’s similar status (V, 847–53).<sup>251</sup> (The vigour of Turnus’ response to Allecto suggests in any case that her words have hit home.)<sup>252</sup> Tellingly, in his 1614 tragedy *Turne* Jean Prévost entirely omitted the part of Allecto. And Lucan had already dispensed with the gods. It remains the case, then, that divine interactions with human beings have the asymmetric structure I have identified. Divine action in traditional literature is—immediately or mediately—parasitic on, and deeply driven by, facts of human psychology.

Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra provides an interesting case in this connection. Initially, Clytemnestra is happy to take responsibility for her husband’s murder, indeed glories in her deed, and defends her action to the chorus as though it were entirely her responsibility (1372–1447). But when the chorus responds (1470) that the spirit of the house is wielding power through women, and that Zeus is responsible for everything (1486), Clytemnestra seizes the opportunity to urge that an avenging spirit committed the murder in her person (1501). The chorus rejects this pretext and affirms that Clytemnestra did the deed (1505–6), but then concedes that an avenging spirit might have been an accessory (1508). In his commentary Eduard Fraenkel says that Clytemnestra ‘is not making excuses for herself’ (1978, vol. 3,

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<sup>250</sup> On this debate, see Lloyd 1984; Goldhill 1997b, 145–50; J. Gregory 1997, 170–6; Lee 1997, xxiii, and notes on 987–8, 1038, 1043; Mossman 2005, 357–63; Rutherford 2012, 159; Pucci 2016, 34–49. On Gorgias’ encomium to Helen, which is relevant here (esp. §6), see Goldhill 1986a, 234–5; Rutherford 2012, 54.

<sup>251</sup> See W. Kühn 1971, 92, 111–12; O’Hara 1990, 67–8; Mackie 1991.

<sup>252</sup> C. Renger 1985, 41.

711); but that is exactly what she is doing, though in due course (1551–3) she drops the strategy and reverts to her initial acknowledgement that she killed Agamemnon.<sup>253</sup> I suggest that the back-and-forth movement illustrates the essential identity of natural and supernatural glosses on Clytemnestra’s action, which has the effect of giving priority to the natural. She tries to shift the blame for her deed onto the *daimōn* of the house, but, though it was the chorus that first suggested the excuse, it now disallows the move:<sup>254</sup> even if an avenging spirit is an accessory, that does not absolve Clytemnestra from guilt. Despite overt mention of an ancestral curse, Aeschylus’ agents are still free and incur their guilt freely,<sup>255</sup> in the *Oresteia* no less than in Eugene O’Neill’s powerful adaptation of it, transposed from the Greek heroic age to the immediate aftermath of the American Civil War, *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Garvie writes that ‘In Aeschylus it seems that the son who inherits the family curse is never an innocent sufferer. He inherits not just guilt but a propensity to incur fresh guilt himself, and he is thus always in some degree responsible for his suffering’.<sup>256</sup> The point applies to Clytemnestra too.<sup>257</sup> Attempts to blame the gods in Attic tragedy are indeed generally implausible. Aeschylus’ Eteocles, like his Clytemnestra, tries to transfer responsibility for his actions to the divine (*Seven Against Thebes*, 689–91); but the chorus insists that it is his own fatal desire that prompts him to meet his brother in single combat (692–4).<sup>258</sup> The excuse fails from Homer, whose Zeus roundly rejects the stratagem, to Garnier’s Cleopatre, who likewise dismisses the theological excuse that Charmion offers her, to Hughes’s Mordred, who blames fate but is aware of his own guilt, to Goethe’s Egmont, who likewise inveighs against his *Schicksal* but admits that he freely ignored the warnings he received, to Thomas Hardy’s Napoléon, who pretends to be ‘Ruled by the pitiless Planet of Destiny’ in a world that is clearly governed by human decisions; recall too the epiphenomenal close of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>253</sup> See Denniston and Page ad loc.; Denniston 1939, xvii; Bremer 1969, 120; Garvie on Aeschylus, *Persae* 354; Finglass on Sophocles, *Electra* 199, 528.

<sup>254</sup> Cf. Euripides, *Children of Heracles* 989–90, with Allan ad loc.

<sup>255</sup> See N. Hammond 1973, 397–9; Dodds 1973, 56. *Contra* Denniston 1939, xvii.

<sup>256</sup> Garvie 1986, xxviii. See also xxix–xxxiv, and note on 435–7.

<sup>257</sup> On the terminology of responsibility, see Dodds 1973, 60 n. 2; Fraenkel on Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 811 (though he misses the vital asymmetry, on which I have been laying emphasis); Garvie on *Choephoroi* 910, 911; Stevens on Euripides, *Andromache* 1005–6; Willink on *Orestes* 3, 31.

<sup>258</sup> See Hutchinson 1985, 148 and notes on lines 689, 690; Winnington-Ingram 1983, 37, 51; R. Parker 1997, 153. Cf. Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 1118–20, with Schein ad loc.

<sup>259</sup> Homer, *Odyssey* I, 32–4; Garnier, *Marc Antoine* 466–82 (cf. 1136–69); Hughes, *The Misfortunes of Arthur* (in Cunliffe 1912) I, 4, 110–12; II, 3, 127–30; (cf. III, 1, 211–20; III, 4, 18–23; V, 1, 121); Goethe 1985–99, vol. 5, 548; Hardy, *The Dynasts* III, 6, 3 (1965, 468; cf. 505, 519); 1967, 446.

In Sophocles' *Ajax* it is reported by the messenger that Ajax once boasted that even a nobody could be successful with the help of the gods, but that he believed he could win glory without them (766–9). The phrase 'without them' (δίχα κείνων) is remarkable, as Patrick Finglass notes (ad loc.), because of the absence of a negative: 'great feats are typically achieved "not without the help of the gods"'.<sup>260</sup> Ajax' boast is unheroic, and it puts him in the same camp as notorious blasphemers like the Locrian Ajax (*Odyssey* IV, 504) and Capaneus (*Seven Against Thebes* 427–8).<sup>261</sup> One may reconstruct the theoretical background of Ajax' boast as follows. The presence or absence of divine help is initially a matter of success or failure: if one succeeds one infers that one had divine help, and not if not.<sup>262</sup> So here the *operatur* principle is fully functional: the divine shadows the human. But once that idea is in place, it is natural to pray to the gods for their assistance *in advance*, so as to ensure success. By the same token, it might be thought risky not to do so, and then by a further step the boastful and the blasphemous can claim that 'even without divine aid . . .'. So this looks like another case where the *operatur* principle provides theoretical underpinning, but, once a divine apparatus is in place, it takes on a life of its own. This structure enables us to solve a puzzle noted by A. L. Brown (1983, 33): the Olympian gods are depicted as enjoying private lives as independent agents, but when they intervene in human affairs they are restricted to 'bringing about' events that could have happened anyway through natural causes. Why? The answer lies in the asymmetry I have been stressing. The gods are so restricted because their *primary* or basic function is to ennoble the natural, not to change or undermine it. Once they have been posited, a *secondary* or derived level comes into existence at which the gods can be portrayed as superhuman agents with private, independent lives, but the fact that their powers of intervention in mortal affairs remain severely limited betrays their naturalistic aetiology.

A similar point applies to allegorical abstractions. In his *Life of Milton* Dr Johnson famously observed that 'such airy beings are, for the most part, suffered only to do their natural office; and retire. Thus Fame tells a tale, and Victory hovers over a general, or perches on a standard; but Fame and Victory can do no more' (1958–77, vol. 21, 198). So, for example, when the reckless Sagramors attacks Parzifal, the latter is held in distraction by Lady Love (*vrou Minne*). Fortunately his steed is alert to the danger and its movements bring Parzifal to his senses—or, as Wolfram von Eschenbach puts it, Lady Reason (*vrou Witze*) brings him to

<sup>260</sup> See e.g. Aeschylus, *Persae* 164 with Garvie ad loc. *Contra* Rose 2012, 258.

<sup>261</sup> See Finglass's note ad loc. for further references; Winnington-Ingram 1980, 18.

<sup>262</sup> Cf. Garvie on Aeschylus, *Persae* 950–3.

his senses (*Parzifal* 288, 3–14). Johnson goes on just after the passage quoted to censure those poets who give ‘airy beings’ more to do than perform their natural office: ‘In the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus, we see Violence and Strength, and in the *Alcestis* of Euripides, we see Death brought upon the stage, all as active persons of the drama; but no precedents can justify absurdity’ (ibid.). Absurd or not, the important point for our purposes is that these developments have the articulated, split-level structure I have identified: in its conceptually original manifestation, Death can do no more than perform its natural office, but once it is brought on stage as a character, it can be given more to do. When, in Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*, Erminia steals Clorinda’s armour and secretly leaves Jerusalem to find Tancred, Love invigorates her failing spirits and flagging limbs, but also laughs at the ridiculous figure she cuts in her masculine attire (VI, 92–3). In his classic work *The Allegory of Love*, C. S. Lewis skilfully traced the process of abstraction that underlay the trend to allegory in late classical and medieval literature. What does not emerge from Lewis’s discussion with sufficient clarity, however, is that the process of abstraction is in some respects a reversion to type: the ‘allegorization of the pantheon’ (2013a, 73), by virtue of which, for example, Mars becomes a mere symbol of war (no love affairs with Venus), is in fact a *rediscovery* of the gods’ original function and point. The gods, Lewis tells us, ‘sink into personifications’ (ibid., 78–9); but that is what they always really were.

To obviate possible misunderstanding, I need to make clear that I am not suggesting that the naturalizing and debunking thoughts that I have been exploring in this section in connection with the *operatur* principle were actually entertained as a matter of course by ordinary people in antiquity or the medieval period. The moves were certainly available, and they were entertained by some, relatively enlightened thinkers (I shall return to this point, §20), but one presumes that for the vast majority of people divinity was, in Ruth Padel’s words, ‘part of the fabric of the world and the self’ and that for them, as Thales said, ‘all things are full of gods’ (1992, 48). Again, it may be true to say, as Blair Hoxby does, that ‘the early moderns, unlike most of us today, experienced their selves not as bounded egos but as voids open to spiritual influences’.<sup>263</sup> In fact I think that this—and certainly ‘voids’—goes too far (I shall return to this issue in Chapter 4); but I am not denying that, until relatively recently, for most people the ordinary world was felt to be interpenetrated by an extraordinary, spiritual world with its own distinctive ontology and dynamics. The question in this section has concerned the extent

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<sup>263</sup> Hoxby 2015, 80; cf. Orgel 2002, 162; McLuskie 2003, 399–400; Shapiro 2015, ch. 10.

to which that ontology and those dynamics are—and are portrayed in tragic literature as being—independent of the natural, and in particular independent of natural human motivation. My contention has been that, at the primary or basic level, there is no such independence, and indeed that the supernatural is dependent on the natural. Only at a secondary or derived level does space arise—assuming that a divine apparatus, generated at the basic level, is in place—for a certain measure of divine autonomy. This is a theoretical point. In effect what I have been offering is a *genealogy* of the role of gods in traditional literature, in the sense in which Hume and Nietzsche offered genealogies of morality.<sup>264</sup> The story reconstructs a derivation of the phenomena in a way that is intended to make sense of them and display their underlying rationale. It would not falsify Hume’s genealogy of justice, for example, if it were found to be historically inaccurate: Hume is not trying to reconstruct actual historical events. In the same way, my account here is meant to be a philosophical heuristic rather than a genetic ‘just so’ story.

It does not follow from what I have said that, if you ‘strip [*Macbeth*] of a supernatural stranglehold, placing responsibility for the evildoing entirely on the ambitious couple’, you are thereby forced into ‘seeing it as compensatory for some personal loss or trauma’.<sup>265</sup> That would be too modern an inference, requiring us to find that every wrongdoer is at some deeper level a victim. In Aristotelian-Bradleian fashion the Macbeths’ characters give rise to their actions—they are responsible for their deeds—but the play does not invite us to ask how they got their characters in the first place. There is nothing to suggest deviance from the traditional, Aristotelian view that we are responsible for our characters. Recall the dictum of Plato’s priest that ‘the responsibility is the chooser’s; the god is exempt from responsibility’ (*Republic* 617e4–5). If we read the Myth of Er as part of Plato’s anti-tragic polemic, then we arrive at a ‘Platonic contrast between two ultimate hypotheses about the world—the first that human lives are governed by external forces which are indifferent to, and capable of crushing, the quest for happiness; the second that the source of true happiness is located nowhere other than in the individual soul’s choice between good and evil’.<sup>266</sup> My point here has been that the first of these hypotheses is liable to send us down a wrong path, towards a misunderstanding of tragedy; if I am right, we have the basis of a response to Plato. Tragedy

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<sup>264</sup> See B. Williams 2002, ch. 2; Gaskin 2006, 39–40.

<sup>265</sup> Shapiro 2015, 225.

<sup>266</sup> Halliwell 1996, 347

is about individual responsibility, and the involvement of gods in no way undermines that. It is not the case that tragedy shows how ‘destiny is ultimately beyond human control’.<sup>267</sup>

Schelling argued that tragedy depicts a clash of necessity and freedom, that human freedom consists in struggling against a superior destiny, and that Aristotle was wrong to try to substitute *hamartia* for the will of destiny in the aetiology of tragic guilt.<sup>268</sup> In his essay ‘Über die tragische Kunst’, Schiller propounded the more radical view that ancient tragic heroes were trapped in a causal order that robbed them of freedom, whereas modern such heroes manage to transcend the causal order.<sup>269</sup> Schelling’s position influenced A. W. Schlegel and Coleridge, who in his lectures on Shakespeare held that tragedies involve ‘those Struggles of inward Free Will with outward Necessity’, and was embraced more recently by Raymond Williams.<sup>270</sup> Schelling and Schiller were themselves influenced by the Kantian antinomy between freedom and nature, not to mention the effects, as it developed from aspiration and hope to tyranny and terror, of the French Revolution.<sup>271</sup> And the essential view had already been formulated by Goethe in his 1771 *Rede zum Shakespears Tag*.<sup>272</sup> If my argument in this chapter has been sound, these assertions, and in particular the claim that there is an opposition between freedom and necessity in ancient tragic literature, are unsustainable. As Schmitt observes, ancient tragic heroes are both free and part of the natural order.<sup>273</sup> Indeed modern heroes are too—how could they not be? Schiller’s exemplary modern heroes are Shakespeare’s Coriolanus, Corneille’s Rodrigue and Chimène, and Wieland’s Hüon and Amanda;<sup>274</sup> but when one examines the precise ways in which Shakespeare, Corneille, and Wieland characterize them one finds that, though these figures defy the stars, they do not escape from the causal order. That would, after all, be a rather difficult thing to do: you cannot do it merely by railing against the world, as Lear found when the thunder would not peace at his bidding.

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<sup>267</sup> Hall 1996, 296.

<sup>268</sup> Schelling 1856–61, I, vol. 1, 336; vol. 5, 693–711. Cf. Silk and Stern 1981, 305–12; Steiner 1984, 2; Most 1993, 160–1; Flaig 1998, 17; Goldhill 2012, 148, 175–6; 2014, 310; Young 2013, 80–5; Hoxby 2015, 14–26; Leonard 2015, 50–6.

<sup>269</sup> Schiller 1992–2004, vol. 8, 260–1. Cf. *ibid.*, 395–422; Goethe 1985–99, vol. 19, 642–5.

<sup>270</sup> See Coleridge 1987, vol. 1, 458; Raymond Williams 1966, 20–1, 26, 30–1; Billings 2014, 98–100; Hoxby 2015, 250.

<sup>271</sup> Cf. Lamport 1990, 98–9; D. Schmidt 2001, 75; Lambropoulos 2006, 30–41; Billings 2014, 75–6, 80–97, 103; Hoxby 2015, 14–15; Leonard 2015, 13–27.

<sup>272</sup> Goethe 1985–99, vol. 18, 11; cf. Lamport 1990, 36.

<sup>273</sup> Schmitt 1988a, 187; see also his 1992.

<sup>274</sup> Schiller 1992–2004, vol. 8, 242–3, 260.

There is a fascinating passage in Werner Heisenberg's autobiography in which he describes how he conversed with a friend as they picked their way through the ruins of Berlin after an air-raid in March 1943. (Here one cannot help but recall T. S. Eliot's conversation, in similar circumstances, with the ghost of his former self in the central panel of 'Little Gidding'.) In that discussion Heisenberg diagnoses the *nisus* we have identified in Schelling and Schiller—the thought that freedom can only consist in escape from the causal order—as a peculiarly German tendency of thought.<sup>275</sup> One suspects that it is a good deal more widespread. But it is certainly associated with German tragedy, and not just by German critics. In his splendid biography of Lessing, H. B. Nisbet writes that 'In Goethe's *Götz von Berlichingen*, Schiller's *Wallenstein*, Büchner's *Danton's Death* and most major tragedies of the nineteenth century, there is much more emphasis on the destructive power of impersonal external forces than in Lessing's dramatic theory and practice, where individual character and tensions within smaller human groups remain central' (2013, 405). This rather strongly implies that *Götz*, *Wallenstein*, and *Danton* struggle, in their respective plays, against superior forces—that they undergo *Schicksalstragödien*. But it seems to me clear that all three heroes fully conform to the Aristotelian pattern I have identified, in which *hamartiai*, consisting of culpable cognitive failures, are punished home. *Wallenstein* is plainly subject to what Bernhard Greiner calls his 'enormous self-delusion' (2012, 439). *Götz* indeed thinks he is struck down by the gods,<sup>276</sup> but the play of which he is the hero makes clear that the vital decisions are in his hands and that he commits crucial errors: he misjudges Weislingen, and he foolishly joins the peasant rebellion, the excesses of which he then—predictably—cannot control. Büchner's play resembles the *Oedipus Rex* inasmuch as *Danton's* crimes lie in the past ('durch alle Gassen schrie und zetert es: September!', a reference to the September massacres in which *Danton* had had a hand),<sup>277</sup> and it resembles the fifth act of *Macbeth* both in this respect and in its mood of world-weariness; *Danton* must now pay the price for his past felonies. It is a pity that Nisbet does not mention which other major tragedies he has in mind, but the three that he does mention fully fit the Aristotelian model, as do Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Voltaire's *Tancredè*, which Schopenhauer listed (along with *Oedipus Rex*) as *Schicksalstragödien*.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Heisenberg 1996, 218; cf. Schmitt 2015, 205.

<sup>276</sup> Goethe, *Götz von Berlichingen* V (1985–99, vol. 4, 382, 386).

<sup>277</sup> Büchner 2009, 99. On Büchner's *Danton* see Szondi 2011, vol. 1, 256–7.

<sup>278</sup> Schopenhauer 1986, §51, vol. 1, 355. So too Hughes's *Misfortunes of Arthur* and Gager's *Dido*, which Norland thinks are tragedies of fate (2009, 96, 98, 180).

## 9 Conclusion

Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* does not tell us what would have happened if Apollo's oracle had been silent: would Oedipus even so have killed Laius and married Jocasta? We do not know, but presumably one possibility is that he would not (recall the discussion of Cavell above, §7), and in that case one might say that, though (as I have argued) Apollo did not *make* Oedipus perform those actions, he did do something which was such that, had he not done it, Oedipus *would not* have performed them, so that, even if we do not have the sort of causation that destroys freedom, namely duress, still we have counterfactual dependence. Even if we say, with Kovacs (2009, 361), that Oedipus 'has been deliberately set up' by Apollo, still, agents who are (merely) 'set up' perform their actions freely: if I insult you intending that you lash out at me so that I can then threaten you with legal action, assuming the ruse is successful you might feel that you had been 'set up', but you could not deny that you had assaulted me freely. In a similar way, the youths of Chaucer's *Pardoner's Tale* would not have met their grim end had they not encountered Death and acted on his words, so that we have counterfactual dependence, and Death indeed 'sets them up', but their actions in the story are from first to last free. In the *Nibelungenlied*, the *Meerfrauen* tell Hagen that no one will survive the visit to Etzel and Kriemhild except the chaplain. Hagen tries to falsify the prediction by drowning the chaplain at the crossing of the Rhine, but the chaplain manages to escape to the hither bank, and so does not take part in the fatal expedition:<sup>279</sup> Hagen's very attempt to falsify it contributes to ensuring the prediction's truth. Again, we read in the Holinshed chronicles on which *Macbeth* was based that King Natholocus sent a gentleman to consult a witch about a revolt which was being fomented against his rule.<sup>280</sup> The witch tells the gentleman that the king will be murdered by a close and trustworthy friend, in fact by that gentleman himself. He then reviles her for her villainous prophecy, but on his return journey he realizes that if he repeats her words to the king, or if they are divulged by another, his life will be imperilled, for Natholocus will have good reason to put him out of the way. Whereupon he resolves to strike first, and on his arrival at court he kills the king. Here too we have counterfactual dependence, but also full freedom. (The gentleman is an early victim of the 'Hobbesian trap'.)<sup>281</sup> The same holds of the witches' prophecies to Macbeth in Shakespeare's play: he would not have acted as he did if he had not heard their prediction that he would be king, but his actions are those of a free agent.

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<sup>279</sup> Schulze 2015, 456–61.

<sup>280</sup> See Bullough 1973, vol. 7, 478; Clark and Mason 2015, 87.

<sup>281</sup> Pinker 2002, 322.

Though I disagreed with the view conveyed in the quotation from Nickau given above (§7), it is interesting to note how it echoes the *Tractatus*, where Wittgenstein remarks: ‘Die Tatsachen gehören alle nur zur Aufgabe, nicht zur Lösung’ (‘The facts all belong only to the task set, not to its solution’: §6.4321). By ‘solution’ Wittgenstein means, as he goes on to tell us, ‘the solution to the problem of life’, and for the Wittgenstein of the *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus* that solution resides in taking up a certain attitude to the facts, which in a transcendental sense we cannot affect. For Sophocles, the relevant sense in which the facts obtain is not a transcendental but an empirical one, and as I have stressed Oedipus certainly can affect—settle, determine—the facts. He cannot *change* the facts; but then no one can change the facts, if by that phrase we mean, supposing that it is the case that *p*, having the power to bring it about that not-*p* *as well*. No one can do that; but having the power, given that *p*, to bring it about that not-*p* *instead*, is by contrast unproblematic (at least in many cases), and Oedipus, like any free agent, has that power. (If it is a fact that *p*, then it follows that I do not *exercise* any power I might have to bring about not-*p* instead, but it does not follow that I do not *have* that power; if I had exercised it, then it would not have been a fact that *p*.) But there is also a sense in which Sophocles’ play is about the proper reaction to the facts as they are. Oedipus responds to his catastrophe by a wilful act of self-blinding; but there were other options. He might have left Thebes and succeeded Polybus at Corinth. It might even have been possible for Oedipus to continue to rule Thebes, as in the Homeric and Euripidean versions of the story (it is presupposed in the *Oedipus at Colonus* that he remained in Thebes after the revelations),<sup>282</sup> though during the course of the play Oedipus himself shuts these options off.<sup>283</sup>

The parallel with Jocasta is instructive here. Oedipus drives her to suicide, in effect, but it is by no means clear from the play that she could not have lived with knowledge of the truth if it had been kept sufficiently submerged. It is a nice question when exactly Jocasta gains understanding. Lefèvre thinks that she is just as obtuse as Oedipus (2001, 142), but she evidently grasps the truth more quickly than he does. When Oedipus learns that Polybus has died a natural death, so, apparently, falsifying the oracle, Jocasta tries to stop the investigation (973–83; tr. Lloyd-Jones):

JOCASTA

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<sup>282</sup> See Lloyd-Jones 1983, 118.

<sup>283</sup> See Schmitt 1997, 34–5.

Did I not foretell this to you long ago?

OEDIPUS

You told me: but I was led along by fear.

JOCASTA

Then let none of these things worry you any more!

OEDIPUS

And how can I not fear intercourse with my mother?

JOCASTA

But what should a man be afraid of when for him it is the event that rules, and there is no certain foreknowledge of anything? It is best to live anyhow, as one may; do not be afraid of marriage with your mother! Many have lain with their mothers in dreams too. It is he to whom such things are nothing who puts up with life the best.

It is plausible that Jocasta's line 'Then let none of these things worry you any more!' (μη νῦν ἔτ' αὐτῶν μηδὲν ἐξ θυμὸν βάληις), and especially her use of the vague phrase 'none of these things' (αὐτῶν μηδέν), indicates that she knows the truth. Dawe merely remarks (on 976) that 'Jocasta had inadvertently half opened the door to Oedipus' apprehensive question by using the phrase "αὐτῶν μηδέν" instead of "τοῦτο μή" '—which latter phrase would in context mean: 'Do not let *this particular thing* (the thought about parricide) worry you'. But the point is subtler than that: Jocasta is trying to close down further inquiry into the possibility of incest by saying in effect 'The parricide part of the prediction has turned out to be wrong, so forget *all of it* (including the incest)'. But in order to put the idea of incest out of Oedipus' mind she first has to mention it, and then it sticks. She tries to refer to it as obliquely as possible, hence the deliberate vagueness of her phraseology, but the tactic fails. Once you have mentioned something, however obliquely, you have mentioned it. (And 'in dreams *too*' looks like a Freudian slip—that is, 'in dreams *as well as in waking life*'.)<sup>284</sup> Plausibly, indeed, Jocasta already knows the facts at an earlier stage, namely when she hears Oedipus' account of his background (771–833), for that makes the truth obvious (though not to Oedipus). And the clear irrationality of her response to his account (848–58) seems to betray an urgent impulse to divert Oedipus from what she already knows to be the reality of the situation.<sup>285</sup> At any rate, D. W. Lucas's suggestion that 'Jocasta realizes that Oedipus is her son between 1026

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<sup>284</sup> Though the literal meaning may be 'in dreams as well as in the oracles': cf. Pucci 1992, 96–7; R. Armstrong 2012, 488–9.

<sup>285</sup> See Nickau 1994, 19.

and 1056' (1972, 131) puts the discovery much too late. (In a natural development of Sophocles, Gide's Jocaste knows the truth from the start: 2007, 206–11.)

In the marvellous opening panel of the fourth epeisodion (911–23), Jocasta 'provides a royal and private counterpart to the public acts of piety at the opening of the play, 3–4', as Dawe remarks (on 912–13). She steps forward bearing wreathed branches, and in a poignant and desperate appeal begs clemency of Apollo. Oedipus, Jocasta complains, 'does not judge the present in the light of the past as a man of sense would do' (915–16): that is, he *does* judge the present in the light of the past, but *not in the way in which* a man of sense would.<sup>286</sup> A man of sense would not let the past impose itself on the present; it is better, as she subsequently tells Oedipus in the passage quoted above, 'to live anyhow, as one may', without delving into things best left hidden; for who does not so live, as the Marschallin reminds us in *Der Rosenkavalier*, will be punished by life and unpitied of God.<sup>287</sup> The atmosphere of Jocasta's words is thick with a sense of foreboding and failure, rather like some classical *ekphrases*, such as Aeneas' arrival on the shores of Italy at the beginning of the second half of the *Aeneid* (VII, 25–36),<sup>288</sup> or the matrons' prayer depicted on the mural in Virgil's Carthage (*Aeneid* I, 479–82), or Clytemnestra's prayer to Apollo in Sophocles' *Electra*,<sup>289</sup> or the *locus horridus* scene-setting in Seneca's *Thyestes* before the description of Atreus' appalling acts (641–82),<sup>290</sup> or, again, like the Zwinger scene of Goethe's *Faust* (1985–99, vol. 7, 156), where Gretchen prays to the Virgin—

Ach neige,  
Du Schmerzenreiche,  
Dein Antlitz gnädig meiner Not!—

('Oh graciously incline your countenance, you who are rich in pain, to my need!'), or like the beginning of the second act of *Madam Butterfly* (Puccini 1984, 97), where the tragic heroine's maid Suzuki kneels before an image of the Buddha, and implores the gods:

Fate che Butterfly  
non pianga più, mai più, mai più, mai più!

('Grant that Butterfly may weep no more, no more, no more, no more!'). The words with their musical accompaniment insinuate in unambiguous terms that the maid's intercession

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<sup>286</sup> See Dawe on *Oedipus Rex* 915.

<sup>287</sup> Hofmannsthal 1979, vol. 5, 41.

<sup>288</sup> See Reckford 1961.

<sup>289</sup> See Finglass 2007, 288; Goldhill 2012, 17–18, 58. Cf. also *Antigone* 1183–5.

<sup>290</sup> See the commentaries of Tarrant and Boyle ad loc; Schiesaro 2003, 85–98.

will not avail: the more we hear the incantatory repetition of the phrase ‘mai più’, the more we sense with absolute certainty that the prayer is falling on deaf ears. Shortly afterwards Sharpless arrives with Pinkerton’s letter, and the inevitability of tragedy sets in. Just so in the *Oedipus Rex*: Jocasta’s hopeless words of appeasement are hardly uttered when the Corinthian messenger arrives, with news that will induce the final catastrophe. ‘It is as though, by this coincidence, the gods were mocking Jocasta’s act of piety’.<sup>291</sup>

If Oedipus is morally innocent, as Dodds and others think he is, why does he blind himself? This was by no means a fixed feature of the myth: for example, we know that in Euripides’ version Oedipus is blinded by Laius’ servants.<sup>292</sup> Bernard Williams argues that Oedipus feels ‘agent regret’ for actions that he performed unintentionally: he did not intend the parricide or the incest, but he decides to ‘own’ them nevertheless.<sup>293</sup> Along similar lines, Hegel thought that Oedipus blinds himself because he identifies himself with his acts.<sup>294</sup> The reason for the blinding that Dodds offers has to do with pollution: ‘Morally innocent though [Oedipus] is and knows himself to be, the objective horror of his actions remains with him and he feels that he no longer has any place in human society’ (1973, 72). Dodds cites as ‘the nearest parallel’ to Oedipus’ situation the story of Adrastus in Herodotus (I, 35–45), who ‘was the involuntary slayer of his own brother, and then of Atys, the son of his benefactor Croesus; the latter act, like the killing of Laius, fulfilled an oracle’ (ibid.). Although Croesus forgave Adrastus, on the basis that the killing of his son had been brought about by divine agency, Adrastus refused to demit responsibility, and committed suicide. In one respect Adrastus’ case is unlike Oedipus’; for Adrastus got over the fratricide, and it was the further killing—of someone who was genetically a stranger to him—that broke him. But in another respect the parallel is close, though the connection does not help the understanding of the *Oedipus Rex* according to which Oedipus is morally innocent. For in the case of Herodotus’ story we must ask, as we should always ask when confronted with instances of divine intervention: *why* did the god intervene? Why pick on *Adrastus*? Well, observe that Adrastus was the *sort* of man who would make just this mistake: suspicious—no? And does not half the blame lie with Croesus, who, terrified by the prophecy that his son Atys would be killed, employed to protect him a man who, he knew, had a record of accidental killing? So far from supporting

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<sup>291</sup> Dawe, note on 924; cf. Winnington-Ingram 1980, 180–3; Segal 1981, 236; Goldhill 2012, 13; Rutherford 2012, 347; Rowan Williams 2016, 22.

<sup>292</sup> Euripides fr. 541; Burian 2009, 100 n. 8.

<sup>293</sup> B. Williams 1993, 68–72, 133–5; cf. Gill 1996, 91.

<sup>294</sup> See Greiner 2012, 142–3.

Oedipus' moral innocence, the parallel implies the opposite. But Dodds's explanation of the self-blinding is independent of this point and can stand. Oedipus' innocence or guilt is irrelevant to the issue of pollution. As Dodds says, 'Oedipus mutilates himself because he can face neither the living nor the dead' (1973, 71).<sup>295</sup> But Oedipus also blinds himself because, like Wilmot's Tancred and Shakespeare's Gloucester, he stumbled when he saw.<sup>296</sup> Then he was a seeing blind man; now, like Teiresias, he is a blind seeing man.<sup>297</sup> The act of self-maiming brings to its natural conclusion a running theme of the play.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Cf. Cairns 1993, 216–19; Kullmann 1994, 114.

<sup>296</sup> Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 1334–5; Wilmot, *Tragedy of Tancred and Gismund*, H3v; Shakespeare, *King Lear* IV, 1, 21. Cf. Nuttall 1996, 103; Lefèvre 2001, 140; *contra* Manuwald 1992, 30.

<sup>297</sup> Garvie 2016, 43.

<sup>298</sup> See Buxton 1980, 24–5; Lyne 1987, 194 with n. 62.